

Editor's Foreword:

I know there's a lot of "before the book" stuff this time, but I hope you read it all because I feel like it's important to give due credit. This book, like the others before it, was broken in up into several parts and released in that way. Since I'm putting it out as a complete book I didn't want to interrupt the flow with the "between chapters" comments, so I've "condensed" it all to fit at the beginning.

The only parts I've omitted are retaining to an email address which is no longer active and to the release schedule, which is no longer applicable.

About half way through chapter 3 the original translators for this project stopped, and someone new took over. That person, Shutazen, kept releasing the story on their livejournal page, which you can find here: <http://shutazen.livejournal.com>.

As far as the beginning half of this novel is concerned, once again I tried to change as little as possible. It was, however, originally translated in the present tense. I've changed it to the past tense, both for consistency's sake and my personal preferences. I have a much easier time reading a book written using the past tense because that's just what you see most of the time. I tried to leave everything else as it was.

The second half of this novel, however, was translated as more of a stream-of-consciousness sort of thing, and adhered much less to normal English conventions. It took a LOT of time and effort to take what was written and try and glean what they were trying to get across and then re-write it in such a way that it made grammatical sense. I tried to preserve as much as I could, but there were some things that I added, and some I omitted, in order to try and make everything work. Hopefully everything still comes across properly.

If you would like to check out the original version, it's on the livejournal I mentioned above. They do make some mention of some other team that intended to take the translations and edit them as I have, but as far as I could ever find that group never followed through with their plan, and that's where things left off.

Another thing I'd like to note is that from here on there's no afterword by the author because those were never translated. I personally enjoyed reading those, but I guess we'll have to live without.

I guess I've probably ranted enough, and there's still lots to read after my whole spiel here, so let's get to it, enjoy!

~Moonfaerie24

First Translator's notes:

This is the beginning of the translation of the Japanese novel "Full Metal Panic! Burning One Man Force."

Being the impatient person that I am, I couldn't wait any longer, so I decided to translate this novel. With enthusiasm, I jumped into this project head first, dragging Vicki and Jeannie (aka Phoenixdown7) along for the ride, and was rewarded with many headaches. I can completely understand what the translator of the previous novels went through. I don't think people realize how much work it is, and how long a process it is to translate the Japanese script, and then turn what you've translated into coherent English sentences.

Thank goodness I'm not doing this alone. If it wasn't for Vicki (who double checks my translations and verifies the sentence structure) and Jeannie (who is the wonderful editor that takes our translated version and adjusts it so it has a nice flow), I don't think I would be able to do this.

So, yes, Vicki, Jeannie, and I have tackled this project head on. This novel is over 300 pages long, and like I said, translating a novel is a huge amount of work. Even for three people. So please be patient, we would appreciate it.

We did stick as close as we could to the original meaning of the Japanese version. We had to do some tweaking in order for it to make sense. This book does however have lots of foreign words/names in it, they are of course spelled in katakana. We're doing our best to translate them correctly. But there are some that make us go: "Huh?" If we have any that give us a really hard time, we'll just go with the katakana spelling, and then post the actual Japanese script in the translation notes, and you can tell us your opinion on it.

Do not host these translations on any websites without asking permission. And if we do give permission, we three must be credited accordingly..

Let me address a few things first. A lot of people have asked us if we are going to continue to translate the novel now that Tokyopop has licensed the FMP novels. The answer: Yes. We are going to continue. It shouldn't be a problem since Tokyopop won't be translating BOMF for a very long time. They haven't even released an estimated release date for the first novel.

But since it is licensed, I do have to say this: Please buy Tokyopop's version of the novel when its released...blah blah, you know the drill.

I'm not sure how much longer I'll be able to post our updates on FMP forums and communities, without getting in trouble from said communities and forums. We'll continue to post our updates on mine and Jeannie's LJ accts.

Remember these are liberal translations, not exact. I did stick close to the original meaning, but tweaking was necessary.

I actually ended up translating this part by myself, (Vicki! Where the hell are you?! TT~TT) so it was a bit of a challenge. But I enjoyed it. I just hope Jeannie hasn't got sick of me yet. I don't even remember how many emails I sent her every time I got stuck. Thanks for putting up with me hun.

Speaking of Jeannie, she, once again, did a beautiful job with editing. She is still my personal goddess. I would be lost without her because my grammar really sucks.

Lastly I want to thank all of you for the enthusiastic encouragement, and for all the helpful feedback we received.

Big thank you to Janine and Durendal for helping me with the translating when I got stuck. You guys are the best.

Now on with the story!

-Shandy (aka Ravyn)

Original Editors Notes:

Hi, Phoenixdown7 here.

I'm the lone editor in this operation, and as such I would just like to point out that my services are almost unnecessary given the extraordinary talent of Ravyn in translating this novel to its conclusion. I'm really only of any use as that-girl-who-checks-verb tenses... which is quite a complicated qualification, I know, but hardly worth mentioning as anything remotely helpful to this entire process.

All jokes aside, I'm quite relieved to be working with a translator like Ravyn who makes my life easy...even when she's stumped by a particular phrase and sends it to me via e-mail to help out. It's not nearly as hard as translating the entire novel chapter by chapter, but now at least I know my two years of college-level Japanese have not been in vain.

When she sends parts of the chapters to me, I mainly work on the flow, the phrasing, and the grammar in order to at least

convey the original meaning of the Japanese into the English. It can be difficult in instances when the Japanese phrasing has no true comparison in English, but Ravyn does her best to approximate and I refine it.

In the end, I hope our hard work pays off in conveying the original intent of Shouji Gatou and above all, allowing his playfulness in characterization and dialogue to show through.

So, thanks for reading everyone! Hope you all enjoy it.

-Jeannie

Second Translator's notes:

This is where Ravyn left off. Since I've been helping her translate, I guess I might as well continue where she left off. If only she gave me more material instead of snippets, I would have done this sooner instead of later. Of course this is a rough translation and needs to be edited for grammar and spelling. Well, here it is.

Full Metal Panic!

Burning One Man Force

By Shoji Gatoh



Translators: Ravyn (Shandy), Vicki, Durendal, and Shutazen
Editors: Phoenixdown7 (Jeannie), and Moonfaerie24

Prologue

If you're careless, and your mind becomes clouded, it is possible the world around you – the world you know – will cease to exist.

From then on everything is vague and unclear.

Places and time.

Oneself, as well as other people.

I don't want to die without knowing anything!

A girl wearing dragonfly glasses protests loudly, as tears fall from her eyes.

C4 explosives are wrapped firmly around her torso. A 16-circuit bomb. If the wrong wire is cut, the bomb will explode instantaneously with deadly force. An innocent girl would be blown away in an instant. Leaving her body as nothing more than flesh and blood scattered on the ground.

It all spirals into darkness.

Inside the cramped cockpit, endless information keeps flooding the multipurpose screen.

<In the process of charging up. Starting up all components. Fuselage control unit. Fuselage diagnostic unit. Passive perception unit. Strategy data unit. Firearm control unit. Main-balancer. Start up complete. The CCU link>

The generator's coolant unit is emitting a low groan that steadily grows louder.

He adjusts his grip on the slightly trembling throttle, trigger position confirmed. Checklist abbreviated. The enemy immediately advances toward him.

It all spirals into darkness.

This girl, who always had strong eyes, pauses her hand in the middle of cutting his hair. Quietly she looks him in the eye, and hesitates.

Hey, why don't we kiss?

There is no reason for him to refuse. He is forming the response when she presses the razor against his throat.

You want to see me dead, don't you? It's impossible.

Eyes full of disdain, her hand moves. The sharp blade sinks into the skin, then the windpipe, and slices through his jugular. He can't even cry out her name. The only sound that escapes him is a strange wet gurgling.

It all spirals into darkness.

The passenger plane crash-lands into a world of water.

It's cold. Cold. Cold.

His beloved mother is no longer warm. While embraced in darkness, not once does he move. Two muttered words are the only things echoing in his ears.

Live. Fight.

Help never comes. The water divides. The crashed airplane, holding him within, sinks deeper into the cold sea. He feels nothing anymore. Or, maybe, that is the ideal ending.

It all spirals into darkness.

The sky is clear and the weather is fine. Somewhere in a courtyard, surrounded by many windows and many people, a girl he doesn't know appears, standing alone, stalk still, before him.

Her head is bowed. She's crying.

Idiot.

"Leave", she whispers. Everyone looks at him and sneers, throwing jeers and ridiculing him.

And then –

Radiance.

A burning light stung his eyes as he slowly returned to his senses. As if he were injured, his fuzzy mind called upon the soldier within him, and he began to question himself.

Where am I?

Under the bed. Sunlight shone through the window and was thrown across his closed eyelids. A cheap motel bed. A cheap motel – A motel in a town called Namsak. A town located in a tiny corner of Southeast Asia.

Who am I?

I'm Sagara Sousuke. Kashim. Sousky Seagal. Sergeant.

Urzu 7. He had been called various names.

Now?

It was morning already. Probably around 7 o'clock. It seemed, last night he wandered around so much that fatigue had finally won out. He most likely got, maybe, six hours of sleep.

How did I get here?

Counterfeit passports were prepared. Several airmail connection flights were taken, and the land route was used as well.

This region has some leads, but nothing that really matters.

Then, why am I here?

It was decided.

The enemy would be hunted down.

Chapter 1: Arena

An enormous steel foot slammed onto the cracked asphalt.

Walking on the right-hand side of the street, only dozens of centimeters away, Michael Lemon had been very close to being crushed under said foot.

Just like a lemon being squeezed and drained of all its juice, he thought.

That was also the impression he got from this town. It was almost expected, really, for the police officers, forced to clean up a town like this, to become cold-hearted, dirty cops.

The climate in this area was like a tropical heat. It soaked in, bit by bit. It completely zapped you of your energy if you weren't accustomed to it. Nevertheless, when the AS' foot slammed down beside him, Lemon let out a hysterical shriek and leapt back onto the crowded sidewalk. Unfortunately, his back collided with another pedestrian.

"Watch where you're going, bro'!"

The person he collided with was a young man.

The stubble on his face, combined with his slightly dirty work-clothes, gave him a scruffy look. However, the twisted scar that took up most of the right side of his face didn't help. A former soldier perhaps? For a soldier who ran away before the end of the war, day-to-day employment was probably the easiest way to survive.

"Ah..."

In the short time that passed, Lemon forgot what he was going to say.

It was evening already. This town he was visiting, in Southeast Asia, was sweltering hot and overflowing with a painful concoction of sounds. Civil war and international border disputes for dominance plagued the areas that touch the border. It was that chaos that this strange town thrived on.

Rickshaw bicycle. Three-person scooter. Overloaded lightweight truck.

Mixed in with these crude vehicles, the old model Arm Slave calmly strode down the street. It was a Soviet and Chinese made type called ‘Savage’. The stout body and large head often give people the impression of a frog. An orange human-shaped weapon that stands taller than a two-story house.

However, it seemed this AS’ weaponry had been removed. A big searchlight was installed in place of the machine gun in the head, and fully loaded to its back were a shovel and crane for construction work.

The AS’ diesel engine gave a distant groan. Michael Lemon watched, completely bewildered as the AS, which only moments ago had almost crushed him under foot, gave him a good-natured wave. Up until now, for some reason or another, he hadn’t seen any newspaper photos or images of an AS at such a close range. It was a little too close...

“Bro, are you listening!? Hey!!”

A rough jab to his shoulder brought him back to his senses.

Realizing that he hadn’t even apologized to the person he ran into, Lemon clumsily lowered his head.

“M-my apologies, that was inexcusable, Monsieur...”

“It’s not ‘Monsieur’, you gay bastard! Shit! That’s all you have to say to me, after I’ve been patient, while you stand there all pale-faced and dazed!? Well!?”

Honestly, this man was over exaggerating. Actually, Lemon was a young man of delicate appearance. He wore frameless glasses, and his normally pale face was sun burnt. His shoulders and back were broad, but compared to the men in a town where males are quite dominant, his arms and legs were thin. He's the type of guy who's more suited to working in an air-conditioned building, rather than hanging out in a place like this.

"Ah, no. I appreciate your concern, but it's nothing. I seem to be fine-"

"Who's concerned about you!? Geez!"

Lemon wobbled dangerously when the man roughly grabbed the sleeve of his shirt.

"Whoa-"

"Come here!" With unexpected brute strength, the man dragged Lemon to a nearby alley across the street. Lemon voiced his complaints with "Stop it already," and, "That hurts." But was largely ignored.

Honestly! He's not concerned at all, Lemon thought, irritated.

"Hey, would you just wait a second? It's not like I bumped into you on purpose, is it? There would be no point. You have a right to be angry but if you would just calm down-"

A sudden fist to the nose shut Lemon up.

Stars burst before his eyes and a wave of dizziness washed over him, prompting him to crouch down and hold his face in his hands. He vaguely realized his attacker was speaking to him and he turned his head to the side in order to hear what he was saying.

"...Going on and on like that! Enough already! I'm really getting pissed off. So here's the plan: How about you pull it out? Okay?"

“Pu-pull what out...?” Lemon barely managed to sputter out. Blood was spilling from between his fingers. It made a *drip drip* noise when it hit the ground. There was no sign of life in the filthy alley, but it produced a stench that enveloped everything.

“You’re French, right?” the man with the scar asked.

“Y-yes.”

“What’s your occupation?”

“Reporter”

“That means you must have a camera. Hand it over. Along with all your foreign money. Euros or Dollars, it doesn’t matter.”

“C-camera... that depends ... as for foreign money, I don’t have any.” Lemon said.

“Don’t play dumb with me!”

With tremendous force, Lemon was thrown to the ground. The shock he received when his recently washed shirt got wet from the floor of the filthy alleyway was nothing compared to the pain that shot through his back as it hit the ground, hard.

The man straddled Lemon like he was straddling a horse and sat on his chest. Wrapping his hands around Lemon’s throat, he forcefully tightened his grip.

“You know something? A little while ago, when you were stumbling along the roadside, I saw you coming. I’m the great Janristo-sama, got it!? I’ve got alcohol expenses to worry about! All you had to do was hand over your pocket money. You think you can get away with disappointing me? Huh!?”

How did this – he was targeting me from the very beginning ... Lemon finally realized.

If he thought about it, what he’d been doing up till now: restlessly surveying his surroundings while wandering around, occasionally stopping to look at a camera that catches his eye. A Caucasian male stood out quite a bit in a chaotic town like this,

didn't he? He hadn't been aware of it, but somewhere along the line, he'd been followed.

If that's the case, then, evidently, to the local punks I'm as good as a sitting duck. This really is an awful way to be defeated, isn't it? But honestly, this is over doing it.

"A- guh."

Showing no mercy, the man's fingers dug into his throat. The additional pressure wasn't enough to kill him, but it was still a terrible strength.

Just then, a woman's voice called out from the mouth of the alleyway.

"What are you doing this time, Dao?" Over the man's shoulder, because of the light behind her, all Lemon could see was a silhouetted figure. But she was definitely small in stature. Even her voice sounded young – almost childish.

"Nami? Keep walking," the man called Dao replied, clicking his tongue in disgust.

"I'm not going anywhere. Doing whatever you please and mugging people causes problems, you know? It's because of people like you that this town's reputation gets worse and worse. The whole point of the 'Arena' was to bring in tourists. That's why the number of tourists has increased lately."

"So what? It doesn't matter either way. This place is a dump."

"So disobedient," She sighed, and took something out of her handbag.

The small sound of metal clicking metal, a sound that suited her diminutive size, reached their ears. It was the sound of a gun's hammer being cocked.

"Hey, hey! You serious...?" Dao exclaimed in disbelief.

“I’m not a murderer. However, I can inconvenience you to the extent that it would take you 2, maybe, 3 months to recover.”

“You’d shoot me just to protect some bastard you don’t even know?! Me? A member of team Ogre?!”

Dao’s face turned pale, his voice trembled in anger. His grip on Lemon’s neck loosened as he glared at the woman’s face.

“Weren’t you saying you needed drinking money? In that case, if I can get you that, problem solved. Here.” Walking briskly toward the two men on the ground, she shoved some wrinkled paper bills – real money, the kind that the border zones usually use – in front of Dao’s face.

“I won’t forget this.” Dao threatened.

“This isn’t for forgetting. It’s for disappearing.”

Snatching the money extended before him, Dao stood up, spit on the ground, and promptly left the ally. Lemon sighed in relief. Even though his rescuer, who was still holding the gun, didn’t seem to care at the time, Lemon had been worried that Dao would have attacked her.

“Th-thank you.”

At the sound of his voice, she turned to him, and this time he could actually see her. This woman – no, this girl – grasped the pistol with certainty. He didn’t know the maker or the model number, but it was a cheaply made revolver. It was probably an illicit manufactured good purchased on the black market from the Philippines or its surrounding areas.

In this day and age, in what way is that gun threatening?
He thought.

Seeing the doubt on his face as he looked at the revolver, the girl laughed.

“Ah, this. It doesn’t shoot any bullets. It’s broken.” As she said this she turned and pointed the gun straight at him. With a

completely serious look on her face, she pulled the trigger. Jolting in shock, Lemon, who was still on the ground, scrambled back. He must have made quite the sight because the girl laughed again.

“What the hell are you doing!?” He demanded in a voice slightly higher than normal.

“You’re not a fast learner, are you? I said it’s broken. It won’t shoot any bullets...” she paused and gave the gun a thoughtful look, “at least, I don’t think it will.”

“Wh-”

“Well then, Monsieur.” The girl spoke over him. She was leaning in as she peered into Lemon’s face, he could have sworn that her eyes started to sparkle. “With the money that I handed over to that guy plus the handling fees, that will be a total of \$4000. Sounds fair, right?”



This girl, who demanded a \$4000 payment, called herself Nami.

Upon closer inspection, she appeared to be no older than 15 or 16 years old.

Her brown, unkempt, hair was tied back into a ponytail. Even though she didn’t wear any make-up, her eyes stood out. Her eyes were large and mischievous, but they also left the lasting impression of a marked intelligence floating just beneath the surface. She was wearing oil-stained work clothes, which consisted of well-worn denim jeans and, instead of the conventional t-shirt, she sported a form-fitting tank top. Most likely, she was either an electrician or she worked in a repair shop somewhere.

“\$4000? Don’t be absurd! That’s way too much money!” Lemon complained, as he trailed after Nami.

They reached the mouth of the alleyway and stepped out onto the bustling street. Nami curled her lips in irritation at his protest.

“Should it be cheap!?” she rebuked hotly. “That Dao guy, he’s famous for his temper! You know why? He killed more than 30 people during the war. Seriously. You would have been no exception. He would have killed you and torn your body limb from limb.”

“Ah...I see. You have my thanks then.” Lemon stated dryly as he wiped the blood from his face. With his other hand, he removed some money from his pocket and rudely shoved it at Nami. If it was converted into dollars, it would be approximately \$300.

“What the hell is this? This isn’t enough at all!” Nami whined, making herself appear even younger than she actually was.

“In this town, with that amount of money, you can live quite comfortably for at least a month. Besides, naturally, I wouldn’t be carrying such a large sum of money around. That’s all I have on me. You should be happy that you got anything at all.”

“Well, then give me your camera. Your PDA and cell phone, too. Give me everything.” Nami’s child-like eyes sparkled with amusement.

“This isn’t a joke! It’s a business agreement.”

“You’re so disobedient”

Lemon quickened his pace, forcing Nami to almost run to keep up with him.

“A ‘Business agreement’, huh? You’re pretty good with words. I guess that’s why you’re a reporter.” After considering him for a moment she asked, “Are you seriously a reporter?”

“Uh huh. I’m just a rookie though.”

“Do you write for a magazine or something? I bet you get paid a load of money for something like that.”

“Not as much as you might think. Besides, the system they use to determine how much I get paid makes no sense to me. It all depends on the story, I guess.”

“The story, huh... hehehe.” A wide grin spread across Nami’s face. The look on her face was very similar to the look a stray dog makes when it finds an unexpected feast on the side of the road.

“Is it really so interesting here that you would come specifically to Namsak?” she commented casually. “Don’t tell me. You’re here because so much reporting these days is sympathetic toward rich people and written from that point a view. So you’ve decided to do a story on how the poor people, who are left behind, make a living in this post war prosperity. Is that it?”

“What are you talking about? Would that even make a good story?”

“Ah yeah yeah. You could say that. But that’s not why you’re here, is it?” using her index finger, she poked Lemon’s cheek to emphasize her point. Not really able to honestly deny her assumption, Lemon stayed silent.

“Even when there is a good story like that playing out in one place, most likely, there is something else going on somewhere else in the world that’s similar. But, that’s not the case with Namsak. We have something here that you won’t find anywhere else. You’ve come here to see ‘that’, right?”

“.....”

The sun sunk beyond the horizon and night quickly blanketed the town.

Unintentionally, Lemon stopped walking and gazed further down the street.

Beyond the busy street they were standing on— right in the center of groups of glaring neon buildings – stood an imposing soccer stadium. No, at one time it might have been a soccer stadium, but not now. It was built before the war, and in the middle of all the chaos it had been neglected. Not long after that, this building, riddled with bullet holes, came to be used for a completely different sport.

Endless amounts of heat and noise flowed from the stadium.

A roar of a gasoline engine that had no muffler.

The high-pitched screech of metal clashing against metal.

And—Enthusiastic cheering, angry voices and cries of admiration completely drowned out everything.

The stadium's lights were strong too. It was like high-class sake reflecting the light and shining the prismatic colors into the night sky, all from a gigantic sake cup that was placed, imposingly, in the center of the town.

“Is that it?” Lemon asked.

Again, the grin spread across Nami's face.

“Yep, that's right. The ‘Arena’.”



The stadium was packed full with spectators. In the field of the modified sports stadium, right in the middle, two human-shaped weapons—Arm Slaves – clashed.

They were both ‘Savage’ models.

The Savage model isn't a new AS by any means, but it's used the most. Plus, because the model is mass-produced, it's the AS that is most widely spread around the world.

One of the machines, a derivation model of the RK-92, was painted florescent pink. It was a relatively newer version; it had a gas-turbine engine that ran on jet-fuel.

The other AS was also an RK-92 but it was painted yellow and black—tiger stripes. It was one of the first models of the Savage. The fundamental design was the same, but its power source was a diesel engine. A considerable amount of these models are sold, legally and illegally, all over the world.

Florescent pink and tiger stripes.

Definitely a far cry from the paint job the military AS' received.

The audience went wild as the two ASes grappled, punched, and kicked each other.

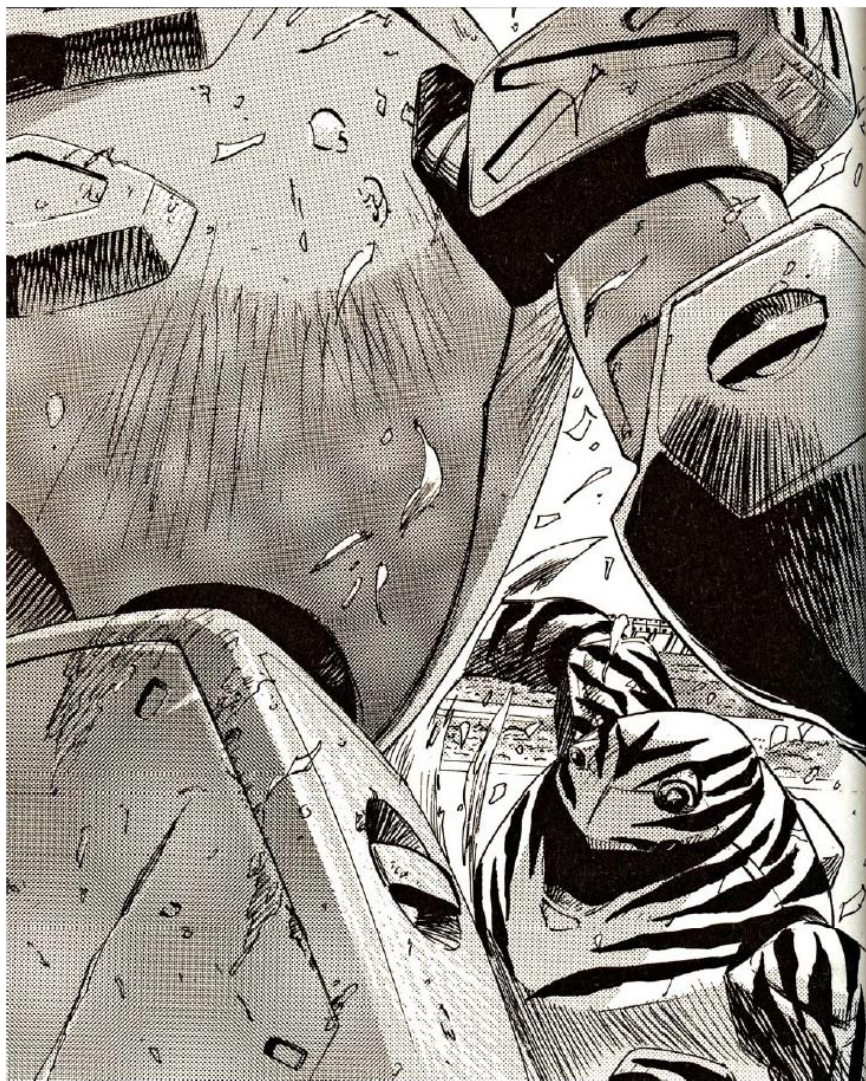
The florescent pink AS charged at full speed and leapt into the air. Its heavy metal body seemed to float in mid-air. Letting gravity do its job, with all its weight it dealt an explosive dropkick to the back of its opponent's neck.

The collision sparked a violent sound.

The tiger striped AS, whose head had been mostly blown off by the attack, was thrown more than 20 meters away, and slid over the concrete that marked the outer boundary of the field. It crashed into a water tank. Tons of water sprayed over the area and the AS stayed motionless.

The shrill shriek of a siren signaled the conclusion of the match. The entire audience was on its feet, the tempest of cheers and boos gushed forth and echoed throughout the grounds. Countless scraps of colored paper danced through the air.

"Winner! Bloody Queen!!" The announcer's voice boomed throughout the stadium. Lemon, who was sitting in the guest area, frowned slightly when he heard this.



“Bloody Queen? Is that the fluorescent pink frog that’s still standing?”

How the hell do you get the name ‘Bloody Queen’ from that color? Lemon thought silently. As far as names go, wouldn’t ‘Porno Queen’ or ‘Missile Girl’ suit it better?

“They didn’t have any other paint available,” Nami, who was sitting next to him, answered and shrugged, “it was the only color they had. After that, I guess you could say they were stuck with it. Yep, stuck.” She finished with a nod.

“Ha ha. Wow, that’s...”

Rough.

It was just as he suspected though. They didn’t use firearms. However, with the AS receiving so much damage and ending up in that condition, the pilots safety couldn’t be guaranteed by the end of the match.

In fact, at that very moment, the pilot was being dragged out of the defeated AS by the medical staff. He was completely limp as they placed him on the stretcher in order to transport him off the field. Even from a distance, he could see the pilot’s left arm was bent in a bizarre direction and dangling heavily at his side.

The AS’ movements had surprised him. Its short and stout body gave the impression that it was slow-witted, but its footwork was the complete opposite of its appearance. Its movements were quick and agile, very similar to a pro-wrestler.

I see... I guess you could say this is the best way to collect the data I need, Lemon thought.

“That’s amazing strength.”

“Isn’t it?” Why did Nami look so proud when he said that?

“I don’t know who started it, but after the cease-fire at the end of the war, they started using ASes for pro-wrestling and started gambling on them.”

“With military weapons? There is no way that using ASes for such a sport is authorized.”

“It isn’t authorized. It’s completely illegal, but the police say and do nothing about it. The association that’s promoting the sport is bribing them, it’s an underhanded method, but it’s effective.

It's unclear in the first place if the police's power itself actually comes from this country."

"Ah..."

Namsak was strategically placed on the border of three different countries where traffic was heavy. It had been exposed to the harsh chaos of the civil war and border disputes for years. Right up to the time of the cease-fire agreement, initiated by the leaders of the United Nations, had been exchanged. However, even with the cease-fire deal, the control of the town was still random and always uncertain. Moreover, because of the treaty, no country would station armed forces near Namsak, so the disorder and confusion there continued.

Because of its location, Namsak constantly attracted both people and money, which resulted in a suitable amount of trade. With the constant traffic moving through the town, the place was pretty lively. It was common knowledge that in that place, money – not an armed force – was the deciding factor that allowed one to seize substantial control of the town.

"So, the Arena is a big seller. People travel through Namsak just to see it. At first it only used the 'Savage' model that had been released in Cambodia. Now a great number of second-hand ASes are gathering up and flowing in from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Plus, the 'Mistral' from France, the 'Dorahay' from Germany, the 'Cyclone' from Great Britain, and then there's the 'Bushnell' from the United States. There are quite a few more besides those ones, too." Nami said, naming the AS models with ease. "It's just a bit of international trade fair."

Lemon could only stare at her with a dubious look on his face.

"That's extremely detailed. You sure do know a lot." He finally said.

“Hehe Ah, well, I guess. I am the team owner after all.”

“Huh?”

“We’re a first-rate team, and our AS is first-rate too.” Chest puffed up in pride, Nami raised her chin into the air.

A moment passed as Lemon gave her a blank look. All he could really do was shake his head. He was very tempted to just walk away all together.

“Geez...”

“What’s with that reaction!? You don’t believe me!?”

“Of course I don’t. There’s no way a girl that pesters a greenhorn like me for a ridiculous amount of money, on a street corner, I might add, could own that kind of robot.”

“But I do own one!”

“Then why don’t you sell it? You could easily make tens of thousands of dollars by selling something like that.”

“Aaagh enough already!! You’re so disobedient. I need the money for the cost of parts, and I must have them by all means! They’re essential! Two hours have passed already!”

With a determined look on her face, Nami grabbed his arm.

“Part costs? Two hours?”

“That’s right! Now come with me.”

Nami began walking, forcibly dragging Lemon along by his arm.

He could hear her muttering “*So disobedient*” under her breath as she pushed her way through the crowd. For some reason, it seemed to be her favorite phrase.

“Hey, hey...” Although he was at a loss as to what to do, he didn’t resist or become unreasonable.

Wanting me to pay her \$4000, Lemon shook his head slightly and fought back a smile. Of course he didn’t have that much money. But this girl had defiantly sparked his interest. The

fact was, she had saved him when he was attacked by that thug. Afterwards she could have turned the gun on him and demanded the money, but she didn't. It seems that the outrageous greed for money that festered in this town had not infected this out-going teenage girl.

But, she said that she owned an AS.

He didn't take her seriously. Her claim was completely without grounds, and it was very unlikely. Even if that was the case, his curiosity was peaked. If he really wanted to, he could just brush her off and head back to the Inn. But what's the point in that? Like he said, he was curious.

"Where are we going?"

"My teams paddock. Then, after that, a performance."

He could tell by the tone of her voice, Nami was dead serious.



The area surrounding the former soccer stadium – now known as the Arena – had adapted to suit the extreme sport that now took place there. The outer boundary of the property had even been turned into a paddock maintenance area.

The makeshift paddocks had cheap tin cover roofs, and the only thing dividing one paddock from the next were walls made from iron sheets. The paddocks were lined up side-by-side, one after the other, facing the center of the grounds where the Arena stood. It appeared this was where the ASes –preparing for their next match – were refueled and received their final adjustments, Lemon thought.

The overflowing odors that assaulted Lemon's nose made that more than obvious. It was the strange chemical stench of jet-

fuel, petrol, and machine oil fumes mixing together in the air. Combined with the smell of burnt metal, the stench was overpowering. Apparently, the people that participate in the Arena were the kind of people who couldn't care less about fire hazard regulations.

Not only did it stink, but it was extremely noisy too. The sounds of electric drills, drivers, cutters, and pounding hammers rang through the air, painfully attacking his ears. At the same time the groans from compressors and power generators, along with the roars of diesel and gas turbine engines revving up, pounded into his head.

Lemon already had a splitting headache, and he hadn't even been there for very long.

Nami swiftly lead Lemon into one of the paddocks – just his luck! She had led him into the noisiest garage of them all!

“Right here!” Nami said in a voice that didn't drown out in all the noise.

There it was, right under the crane that was hanging from the steel frame of the ceiling. The AS was parked in the standard position, on its hands and knees. The armor on its back was removed.

Only three mechanics were working on the machine. They each had an electric tool of some kind in hand and were tinkering away in the interior of the unit.

“So? Impressive, right!?” Nami asked.

Actually, the AS was the complete opposite. It was a pretty common antique model Savage, however, even at a glance he could tell that this AS has seen better days. Many sections all over the unit were heavily damaged, and look neglected.

One of the eyes was smashed and remained un-repaired.



The armor on one arm was completely crushed, and had vinyl tape wrapped haphazardly around it. Surprisingly, even in that condition, the piece of armor still managed to stay attached.

One joint was so damaged that it was leaking oil in several places, creating a dark stain on the ground beneath it.

Looking over the AS carefully – from the tip of its antenna right down to the feet – the extent of the damage was terrible.

“Awful, isn’t it?” Nami asked.

Exactly what I’ve been thinking, Lemon thought honestly. But, he would have never expected Nami to admit it so frankly.

“Sure it’s banged up here and there, but all it needs is a little work, and then it will be moving fine. All I need to do is replace the muscle packs for the right arm’s tendon and the right leg’s femur. To be honest, we also need to replace a few hydraulic pipes, and the faulty torque converter needs a tune up...”

“Isn’t that a lot of work? Do you even have enough time?”

“There is time! But we need more money!”

“Oi! Nami!”

Nami abruptly stopped talking, her back stiffened, and her hands clenched into fists.

The one that called her was one of the mechanics who was still working upon the exposed back of the AS. He was a Caucasian male roughly in his 30’s. From his accent, Lemon would say this man was either Australian or German.

“What is it, Ash?!”

“We’ve done everything we can! It’s more than 51 pipes and buffers! That’s not all, but if we don’t at least have that, then it’s over! How do we stand in terms of money?” Ash’s impatience was clear by the tone of his voice.

“Don’t worry! This gentleman is here to give us the money we need! So just wait a little longer!”

“Oh, that’s good news! Sir, please hurry! We’re counting on you!” Ash replied, not even glancing at Lemon as he returned to his work.

If he had looked at Lemon, he would have seen that their new “benefactor” looked like he was going to explode with anger.

“Why you little...” Lemon fumed in a restrained voice.

“What?” Nami replied innocently.

Lemon swore he could hear the sound of his patience snapping.

“Don’t decide stuff on your own!” he bellowed, “All I did was follow you here because you wanted to show me your AS...” Lemon pauses for a moment, before continuing in a much calmer voice “I see, that’s why you were in town. That market-place by the Arena, it has the parts you need.”

Nami nodded her head and muttered, “But we don’t have enough money and the merchants won’t hand over the parts unless we pay up front in full.”

“So that’s why you needed \$4000?”

“That’s right. Now that you understand the situation we’re in, will you help? Please, I’m begging you! Become our sponsor!” she begged, hands clasped before her, giving Lemon a pitiful look.

“But that’s what I’ve been trying to tell you! I can’t give what I don’t have! Haven’t you ever heard the saying: ‘You can’t shake sleeves you don’t have’!?”

“It’ll be alright. If you stick with my team you can get material for an amazing story, right!? You might even get the ‘Peanut Prize’!”

“It’s the ‘Pulitzer Prize.’” Lemon corrected lamely. *She doesn’t listen to a single thing I say*, he thought flatly.

“Right, that’s what I said. See? We agree. So give me the \$4000.”

She even had the nerve to hold out her hand as if he would hand it over just like that. Lemon felt his eyebrow twitch in irritation.

“No. Even if I took it on as a story, it’s only worth \$400 at the most.” Lemon informed her coldly.

Bowing her head, Nami sighed, “...I understand.” She nodded her head like she’d come to a decision.

Lemon gave her a wary look.

The next thing he knew, Nami was snuggling up against him intimately, her fingertips grazing sensually over his abdomen. Lemon’s body stiffened from shock. Using that to her advantage, Nami pressed her breasts against his arm, making him keenly aware that she isn’t wearing a bra under that tank top.

“...then, how about one night with me?” Nami suggested in a sultry voice. “It’s a good deal. Usually this would cost you \$10,000, but I’ll cut you some slack. Only, you’re not allowed to beat me.”

“Why has it come to this!?” Lemon demanded, attempting to free his arm from Nami’s grasp with no success. “I don’t have sex with minors! Besides, you would have a better chance of seducing me if you weren’t covered in oil, and didn’t reek of gasoline. Lastly, what do you mean \$4000 for one night!? That’s more than the market price for a high-class call-girl, you know that right?”

“To tell you the truth, I’m a little scared. But you seem like you would be a gentle escort...”

She was ignoring him again...

“Listen when someone’s talking to you!”

“Hmph– the same goes for you. You’re so disobedient” Nami retorted, easily dropping the sexy act as she clicked her tongue in disbelief. “I don’t get it. If any normal man was approached by a cute girl like me, heard how desperate I was, and received such an offer, there is no way he would refuse.

Unless...are you 'that way'?" Gasp, "You are 'that way', is that why?"

"Why the hell am I suddenly 'that way'?! For your information I am neither gay nor suffering from an erectile dysfunction!"

"Is that so? In that case, I'm not interested in chickens or mama's boys..."

"Why is this happening? Aagh— enough!" Lemon pulled his hair in frustration.

"Whatever, the truth is, if my team participates, and wins, I can return the \$4000 to you easily. Really," she whispered soothingly into his ear.

Lemon shot her a doubtful sideways glance.

"Pft. What are the odds that you'll actually win with that piece of junk? You think you have a chance? It's useless."

"We can win! Even though right now, our AS isn't much to look at, our AS pilot is amazing!"

"Oh" Lemon replied, unenthused.

"His name is Rick. He's a former US Marines AS pilot. A veteran soldier who's gambled with life and death on the battlefield many times. His alias is 'Jungle Eagle' and he's crushed more than 10 enemy ASes. I've seen a lot of people with remarkable abilities pass through Namsak, and he's one of the best!" Nami revealed, even though Lemon didn't really care.

"It doesn't matter what kind of AS unit it is. If Rick is piloting it, he'll win!"

"I wonder about that..."

"I'm serious! If it's him—"

"Nami! We've got a problem!" A young man rushed into the paddock. He was most likely another member of the

maintenance crew. His face was sweaty, and he was wearing an extremely serious expression on his face.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s Rick, he...”



In a corner of one of the Arena restrooms, Rick clung to the urinal as he collapsed.

When someone finally discovered him, he was already dead. He had been stabbed in the back with a knife. It seems to have been a clean attack, aimed right for the kidney. Rick had probably died quickly, not even having the time to call out for help.

The culprit had not been caught. The person who discovered Rick’s body in the restroom recalled “seeing a man with a large twisted scar on the right side of his face”, but the authorities said that wasn’t enough of a description to track down the suspect. But with that description alone, Nami and Lemon knew exactly who it was.

It was Dao.

Until the police arrived, the pilot’s corpse remained laid out on the restroom floor, covered by a sheet. Nami had been kneeling near the body for some time now, not saying a word since they had arrived. Hesitant to say anything, Lemon stood back and watched her silently.

Between the strange encounter, the stupid questions and answers, and all the bickering... he had forgotten.

He’d forgotten that this lively Namsak was a dangerous town, where it’s not strange at all for someone to be suddenly killed on a whim. Most people living there think it’s normal.

“You know something...?” Nami said, her voice sounding lonely.

“I didn’t even really like Rick. I employed him because he was a good AS pilot. But he was also an over-exaggerating braggart. He always looked down on my team and me because he didn’t think a girl should be doing a man’s job. He thought I would be better off being like those young girls that he was always buying whenever he was in town. Always spending the money he earned on tits and ass. I can’t even count how many times he tried to touch me or push me down. He was a good-for-nothing son-of-a-bitch. But you know what...?” Nami’s voice shook, and her shoulders began to tremble. “He wasn’t the kind of guy who deserved to be murdered.”

Giving Rick’s forehead a gentle pat through the sheets, Nami abruptly stood up and exited the restroom with quick steps. Lemon quickly followed, calling after her.

“Where are you going?”

“The paddock. We have to participate...”

“...But, wasn’t he your pilot?”

“That’s right. I’ll have to pilot it in his place.”

Lemon nearly tripped when she said that.

“Do you have any battle experience?”

“Never in a match. But I’ve practiced, and I can move the unit fairly well.”

“You’re AS still needs maintenance...”

“We should have enough money. If I give up on the right arm, and focus on getting the Unit moving, we should have enough money for that... I’ll think of something.”

Her pace didn’t slow at all as she explained this, she just kept walking purposefully forward. Thoughts of begging Lemon for the \$4000 vanished completely as her mind flew into a rage.

“Yo Nami!” A man’s voice called out to her as they neared the paddock area. It was Dao – the man who had threatened and attacked Lemon after dragging him into a back-alley. This time he had many followers accompanying him. It looked like he was also a member of a team that took part in the Arena matches.

“Did you hear? They say Rick was found dead in the toilet. Stabbed in the back, I’m told. It’s dangerous around here, isn’t it? Scary, scary” Dao said mockingly as he slowly approached. Nami glared at him. His huge twisted scar on the right side of his face was still as ugly as ever.

“I told you, didn’t I? ‘I won’t forget this,’ is what I said, right? Did you really think you could get away with pulling such a stunt on me?”

“If that’s the case, then I should have been your target...”

“Says who? I never liked that American anyway. He was always running off at the mouth, never shutting up. He made me sick.”

“...you fucking coward!”

“Are you still planning on competing in the match or are you forfeiting? Looks like I’ll enjoy myself either way. Keep each other company in the meantime. Till then, see ya” Laughing cruelly Dao and the others walked away.

“Nami, don’t tell me... your opponent...?” Lemon asked in disbelief.

“Yep. Dao’s team. They have a fairly good AS, too.”

“That guys isn’t normal! Letting a guy like that participate in such a sport... you can’t fight in this match! He’ll kill you!”

“So I should just run away and hide?!” Nami demanded, her voice growing louder. “I have to win the match to make a living! I’m useless unless I win. If I don’t–” shutting her mouth

firmly, Nami refused to say more. Wiping at her eyes briefly, Nami, once again, headed toward her team's paddock.

"Sorry for causing you so much trouble, Monsieur. All that talk about the \$4000, no hard feelings okay?"

"Just hold on. You...you're not going to do something desperate, are you?"

"I might. Oh well, you gotta do whatcha gotta do."

"But it's dangerous."

"I'm well aware of that," she answered, leaving no room for further argument.

Lemon trailed after Nami and they soon arrived at the team's paddock. He quickly spotted Ash, the mechanic he'd met earlier, along with the rest of the maintenance crew. They all looked so depressed. As all their gloomy faces looked up at the new arrivals, their eyes seemed to ask Nami "Is there no point to this?" Nami nodded firmly, and the entire crew breathed a sigh.

The sounds from the Arena, cheers of the crowd, ASes battling each other, weighed down on the gloomy atmosphere.

That was only natural, though. Dao's team was their opponent – not only that, the psycho was also piloting the enemy AS. A former soldier who probably has some skill when it comes to AS combat. How could that girl possibly fight against that man while using that piece of junk? All it would take was one good hit and that AS would crumble and fall. Nami won't just be humiliated, she'll most likely be dead. The situation looked so bleak that nobody spoke.

"Excuse me, is Rick here?" a voice asked calmly, so calm that it seemed out of place, "I'm an old acquaintance of his..."

Everyone looked toward the voice. There, standing in the entrance of the paddock, seemed to be a young Asian man. It was hard to tell whether the stranger was Chinese, Korean, or Japanese,

but he was most definitely a young man judging by his medium height and build. He was wearing cargo pants and a black t-shirt, with a worn-out knapsack slung over his shoulder. His expression was sullen under his raven hair and there was a small cross-shaped scar to the left of his chin.

It was probably more accurate to call him a boy, rather than a young man. He looked to be around the same age as Nami, maybe a little older. However – his intense expression held no innocence that one would attribute to a boy, so it was difficult to describe him in such limited terms.



Upon first seeing him, Lemon could tell this young man was always aware of his surroundings. Probably even more so right now as he sensed the tension in the air. Yet, an unshakable purpose shone from his eyes. Eyes that— even though he was only a teenager – looked like those of a 30 or 40 year old; eyes that seemed to have seen many things.

“Where is Rick?” the youth asked again.

“He’s dead,” Nami informed him in a bored tone. “It just happened a couple of hours ago. He was stabbed in the back in a restroom at the Arena.”

His eyes widened slightly and his brow furrowed, but that was the only visible reaction he showed to the news.

“I see. I was constantly telling him to watch his back more carefully...that’s unfortunate.”

Even though he said this, he didn’t seem surprised or saddened by the news.

Perhaps...he was used to this type of situation, Lemon thought.

“Who are you?” Lemon asked.

“An acquaintance of his. We were both hired mercenaries during the civil war, three years ago. I heard he started to compete here, so I came to visit.”

“Ah, I see. That’s too bad. It must be disappointing to hear such news when you’ve come all this way to see an old friend. Does this mean you won’t be sticking around?”

“We weren’t friends.”

“What business do you have here then?”

“I’m here because I’m interested in competing in the Arena. However, it seems finding an employer is easier said than done.”

Stunned silence enveloped the paddock. Nami and the rest of the maintenance crew stared dumbfounded at the stranger.

“You...you can pilot an AS?” Nami asked in disbelief.

“A little.”

“‘A little’ Ha ha...” Nami gave a sarcastic smile and glared at the young man.

“Oh, that’s rich! Some foolish brat, pretending to be an ace AS pilot. This isn’t some super strong robot that appears in a manga, you know. This is a complicated piece of machinery. It’s a special military weapon. If an ordinary person pilots this in combat their entire body will become littered with wounds just from being tossed around. Plus, they’d get so dizzy they’d vomit. Sprains and fractures are common-place. There’s no way a half-assed guy like you could handle a machine like this. Got it? If you get it, delusional little boy, go home and watch your TV.”

“Heh...” Lemon laughed under his breath. *Talking like that to someone even though you’re probably the same age...* Lemon thought in amusement, but wisely remained silent.

“Hey, what do you think you’re doing!? Don’t touch that!” Nami demanded.

The young man walked over and puts his hands on the AS. He grasped the armor frame as if he was confirming its strength. Nami rushed over and roughly yanked him back by the shoulder.

“Stop! What the hell did I just tell you!?”

“Is this the unit you use to fight in the matches?” he asked calmly. Clearly he didn’t find Nami’s aggressive behavior in the least bit threatening.

“Yeah, so what? You got a problem with that!?”

“No.... you’re pretty short on time, so you’ll have to make due,” the young man stated with a nod, and then frowned slightly. “But the damage is severe. Even with Rick’s skills, he would have had a tough time...”

“You talk big, but what would you know about this machine?” Nami asked, irritation rolling off her in waves.

“About this machine?” he replied. Then, after a short pause, he began a detailed explanation in a detached voice – as if he were reading straight from a textbook.

“This is an original model of the RK-91. This version was never given any particular model number. Approximately only 130 were ever produced. Compared to the amount of 91M and 92M that were exported – and became mainstream – the amount of this model that was exported is insignificant.

“Because it didn’t adopt a gas-turbine engine in weight and output, it is inferior to the 92. It ends up limiting this model’s level of combat mobility. However, with the 92, they spared some of the frame strength in order to make other allowances. Throwing that away so readily wasn’t a good idea, because in doing so it limits the 92’s hand-to-hand combat capability considerably. Because the weight is so end-heavy, the torque control tends to be eccentric, but adjusting the software accordingly can easily solve that. Even an average-skilled pilot can handle that without much problem.

“In regards to this unit though, the problem is the cooling system. From what it looks like, you seem to only use parts made especially for the 91. You can stop doing that, it’s unnecessary. Ordinarily, it’s said that the air conditioners available for the 92 are not compatible with this model, but for this kind of problem it will be very efficient — at the most you’ll need maybe 15. And if or when you’re budget allows it, you’d better buy some new, unused, muscle packs. In this kind of competition, instantaneous power capabilities should be given top priority.”

The boy uses so many technical terms it was enough to send anyone’s mind reeling. Lemon only understood part of it, but

from the surprised wide-eyed look Nami was giving the young man, she understood everything he was saying perfectly.

“Wha...?” Nami’s face turned red in embarrassment, struggling to find something to say.

This young man’s knowledge regarding this might just have been superior to her own.

“All that goes without saying! This is our precious AS unit, you know!? It’s—”

“Of course it is. You’ve done a good job maintaining it,” he says kindly, with honest approval. The complete lack of sarcasm in his voice left Nami at a loss for words.

“The parts you need should be available in any parts store, and you can dismantle it as usual. But I’m amazed in the first place that you have an original RK-91 model.”

“How do you know all that? You some kind of overzealous military maniac? I bet that’s it. Even if you have that self-important expression, you’re still just an amateur aft—”

“I’m not an amateur,” the young man stated flatly. “I’m a specialist.”

His tone wasn’t resolute, nor was his attitude overbearing when he said this. He simply spoke as if his being a specialist was only natural. His presence held a silent persuasive power making the way he spoke unimportant.

“Oi, Nami...” Ash, of the maintenance crew, said. “What should we do? It looks like this kid is a willing player. Rather than arguing, we might as well ask...”

Nami didn’t immediately deny it either.

She was at a loss as to what to do.

From the lecture she has just heard, it was obvious this guy wasn’t a novice.

And time was running short.



Assuming they could arrange the necessary parts, this last minute maintenance would be cutting it close.

Truthfully, she didn't have faith in her own piloting skills. It was a fact that they would certainly lose if she piloted the unit. But, to take the risk and let some no-name boy who appeared out of nowhere pilot it..... either way they'd be at a disadvantage.

Even if it was from the side, seeing Nami so conflicted by this bothered Lemon greatly.

Eventually—

“Argh— Geez! It doesn't matter anyway.” Nami pulled at her hair with both hands and glared at the youth before her.

“Alright. It just so happens that we don't have a pilot. If you're interested, I guess I can let you do it,” she offered somewhat stubbornly.

“I accept.”

The young man nodded, his expression remaining unnaturally serious. He didn't smile. Lemon wondered why he felt that this boy, even though he was so expressionless, was oddly charming.

“But this unit is in really bad shape,” Nami began to rant. “We have no money. No parts. And we've exhausted all our resources— which I'm trying really hard not to be too bitter about.”

“Understood.”

“Um, regarding that,” Lemon called out modestly.

“What is it Mr. Benefactor? Still plan to help?” Nami asked sarcastically.

“Unfortunately, I just remembered I only have, approximately, \$3000 at my disposal.”

“...eh?” Nami blinked a few times and just looked at him blankly.

Well, that reaction was only natural. Lemon himself could hardly believe the words that were coming out of his own mouth.

“If I use my entire cash-line of credit on my credit card...but how will I do that? Is there an ATM nearby that I can use?”

“Not that I’m not grateful...but are you sure? You were dead set against it earlier,” Nami managed to say, trying not to get her hopes up.

Lemon mustered up as much affection as he could and winked at her.

“If you win I’ll get it back, right? If you lose...I guess I’ll have no choice but to return to my country. But making a gamble on these kinds of odds is what makes it interesting.”

“That amount is fine,” the nameless young man stated with certainty.

“Ha ha. I don’t why I’m doing this, but I’ll leave it up to you, kid.”

“Thank you, Mr. Benefactor!”

Nami’s expression crumpled as she threw her arms around Lemon. Staggering back under her weight, Lemon managed to steady them. His face quickly turned red. He was completely bewildered by the emotional girl clinging to him, and it quickly turned into embarrassment.

“Aw, it’s nothing,” Lemon said and turned to the new pilot.

“My name is Michael Lemon. I’m a Journalist. This is Nami.” He indicated the girl still clinging to him. “What about you?”

“Rick knew me as Seagel...” he paused and looks thoughtful for a moment. “Sagara. Sagara Sousuke.”

“Are you Japanese?”

“Yeah...” Sousuke’s gaze became distant, and when he spoke again it was more to himself, “I came here looking for something.”



A low rumbling sound of a sluggish engine echoed throughout the Arena as Sousuke, piloting the Savage, stepped in. The thunderous roar of the crowd cheering and jeering filled the Arena as well, compounded by a steady chant “*Kill! Kill!*”

Lemon grimaced at the overflow of noise and adjusted the camera he was holding.

“Is this really ok!?” he asked loudly.

“Eh, What?!”

The sponge and the nylon of the headsets they were wearing, plus the noise of the Arena, made it difficult to hear. Nami leaned in closer to Lemon in order to hear what he was saying.

“If he dies, I’ll feel responsible. So I’m starting to wonder if this is such a good idea.”

“I don’t know,” Nami replied with a shake of her head. Looking down, she mumbled, “It’s unexpected, but that guy might be able to do it.” She wondered why she felt like she was reassuring herself more than Lemon.

“Huh? What makes you think that? Tell me. Maybe it’ll ease my heart a little.”

“Everything he said about the Savage was completely accurate. Normal people don’t know those kinds of details. Besides, his body... his torso, his arms, his legs...he doesn’t have a shred of fat on it. He’s completely fit. But around his shoulders he’s

surprisingly solid. These are common characteristics of AS-pilots who have been involved in intense training.”

“Hehe, really?” Lemon gave her a sly smile.

“Don’t look at me like that! It’s not like I was checking him out!” Nami blushed. “I noticed it when he was changing, Okay!? It was only for a moment, but I noticed the skin of his wrists and elbows were thick and calloused.”

“That’s a lot of detail to get just from a quick peek,” Lemon teased.

Nami continued on as if he hadn’t spoken, “When you operate the master-arm for long periods of time, those areas are constantly rubbed against. It’s possible that Sousuke is—”

Just then, the Savage, on its way to the center of the field, stumbled so badly it nearly fell forward.

“.....”

Sousuke slowly steadied the AS, and thousands of spectators roared in laughter.

“Um...did he just trip...?” Lemon asked weakly, all good humor completely wiped from his voice. His unease was in full swing again.

“I take it all back. He really is useless.” At her wits end, Nami buried her face in her hands.

“You’re so rude. I’ve realized that’s a bad habit of yours,” Sousuke retorted. Nami and Lemon could hear him clearly through the headsets they were both wearing.

“That’s nice,” Nami replied flatly.

By now, the opponent’s AS was also on the Arena field. Each shoulder of the armor was painted with the eye of a monster, and, even though they would be ruined by the end of the match, Dao’s team had decorated the unit with ornamental lights that glared under the night sky.

The MC's voice reverberated throughout the stadium as he introduced the two players. "Ogre" was Dao's ring name and team name. Many of the teams' nicknames were over-exaggerated, full of bluffs. However, if you looked at the amount of wins they had, and the nature of the team's members, Team Ogre's name couldn't be more accurate. Sousuke's ring name, "Crossbow", was the name of Nami's team.

"Crossbow? That beat up old thing?"

"That's right. You think it sounds bad?"

Crossbow: A reliable deadly weapon that strikes with a peculiarly heavy blow. In its own way, this name stirred something deep within her, so Nami had decided to use it as a ring name. But the look Lemon had given her when he'd heard the name made Nami feel a little foolish.

"It's a good name." Sousuke had reassured her, *"But it still can't compare to 'Arbalest'."*

".....?"

Facing each other, the 'Ogre' and the 'Crossbow' halted once they reached the center of the field.

A brief quiet fell over the stadium.

The ASes' engines roared to life as their output steadily climbed. Hot air gushed down from the open engine vents, kicking up clouds of dust from the Arena field. Both units took their ready-stances.

The crowd's chants of "kill" got louder and faster as a small siren buzzed and a donated traffic light illuminated. Then, the count-down began.

Dao's loud obnoxious laughter boomed from his AS' external speakers.

"You've got a lot of guts to actually show up in that piece of junk! Did you come here to beg for your life?"

Sousuke didn't respond to the jibes. The Crossbow's external speakers couldn't be used anyway, they were broken.

The crowd's yelling got more violent.

"Kill. Kill. Kill."

"Tear him to pieces! Bash his head in! Pry open the cockpit and drag out the pilot!"

Nami unconsciously gripped the cross hanging low from around her neck, a weak "Please" escaped her lips.

The countdown continued.

One.

Zero.

An overly loud siren screamed, and an electronic bulletin board flashed 'START' in large bold letters.

Immediately both ASes charged at each other.

The enemy M6's instant explosive power was by far superior. The Ogre charged forward with the force of a freight train. In comparison, the Crossbow's speed was irritatingly slow.

It was clear to everyone watching which AS would be blown away when the two machines collided.

But they never collided. When the Ogre lunged to tackle the Crossbow, Sousuke sunk the body so far forward that it was in danger of falling over.

Evasion?

This was what everyone who was watching, including Nami, thought – but the instant the two units passed, the Ogre's legs were swept out from under it, effectively destroying its precarious balance. The unit went air-born, doing a full forward flip in the air.

"!?"

No, only a half flip!

Dao's AS crashed head first into the ground. An ear splitting crash boomed through the stadium from the force of the fall and clouds of dust kicked up into the air.



The entire stadium fell into shocked silence at the unexpected turn of events.

The Bushnell didn't move. It just laid there on the ground, arms and legs splayed out. Dao's unit looked like it received very little damage. So most people didn't understand what had happened.

It took at least ten seconds before the audience began to stir.

Eventually the judges had no choice but to proclaim that the Ogre was unable to continue fighting, and announce Crossbow as the winner.

The crowd responded with protests and boos, and tickets were thrown up to scatter in the air.

The entire stadium was in an uproar at the results.

“What the...?” Lemon muttered, he was clearly one of the people who didn’t understand what had happened.

Nami, for her part, could hardly believe what had unfolded before her very eyes.

“Most likely... the pilot fainted.”

“Fr-from only that?”

“What do you mean ‘Only that’? Don’t be stupid. The shock absorption system is the only thing that protects the pilot against violent falls or intense collisions. An AS can be hit by a car going 100 km/hr, and the pilot can remain completely untouched. But —”

Nami paused and gulped.

“What we just saw – if an AS makes an extreme turn unexpectedly, the shock absorption system can’t keep up....How can I explain this? Think of it this way: The shock absorption system is like a spring. If the spring is already compressed, then it can’t bounce, right?”

“Then, it can’t absorb the shock?”

“Exactly. But it varies depending on the AS model. In order to actually use it to your advantage you have to have extensive knowledge of your opponent’s unit, and you would need to be an extremely skilled pilot. Otherwise it would be impossible. In other words —”

It was not a move any normal pilot could pull off.

“Good skills. Amazing.”

“Oh...”

Nami was so astonished by Sagara Sousuke’s performance that she completely forgot to be overjoyed over the victory. She shivered as she felt the prickle of goose bumps rise upon her skin.

Just who is he?

This was the one thought that resounded loudly through her mind.

Rick – their American pilot who was murdered – had been a ‘good pilot’. But that had only been because, as a soldier, he had been through hundreds and thousands of hours of vigorous training, repeatedly.

But Sousuke was extraordinary in comparison.

In all the pilots that come and went from the Arena, this was the first time she’d come across a pilot with such presence.

He’s so mysterious.

Eventually, Sousuke turned his back on the Arena and took the Crossbow back to the paddock.

“It was nothing,” Sousuke said to the delighted team members of ‘Crossbow’. They had surrounded him the moment he’d dropped down from the AS back in the paddock. “If you look around, you can find dozens of military pilots with my abilities.”

“Even so, it was amazing!” Lemon said. He was all smiles, overjoyed and relieved as he hugged Sousuke enthusiastically with more passion than even a French-kiss warranted.

“...telling me you’re grateful would have sufficed,” Sousuke stated uncomfortably.

“Thank you. You really helped us out.”

“No problem. Besides...”

Sousuke turned to Nami and, with a serious face, looked into her eyes.

It startled her a little bit.

Not because the look scared her, but the opposite. The look had a mysterious charm to it. It gave her the strange impression of a large, hungry dog, quietly begging for its favorite treat by sitting there politely and wagging its tail.

“Wh-what?”

“I want to know if you’ll hire me as your pilot, it would guarantee that have 3 meals a day and that I have enough to pay for lodging.”

In that moment, Nami had no reason to decline his request.

Chapter 2: New World

Once they were finished with the post-battle maintenance the crew headed off to a local pub and Nami raised her glass in victory. Some music played, adding to the lively atmosphere, and glasses of beer were drained and emptied. Everyone who happened to be at the pub was treated to drinks. Curiously enough, several of the customers had actually bet on ‘Crossbow’ to win in the match and had come over to offer their congratulations.

For Nami, the fact that they had won was finally sinking in, and she was completely ecstatic.

“Everyone drink up! Today it’s our treat!” shouted Nami.
“OOH!!”

Lemon, along with everyone else, raised his glass with a hearty cheer and a red face. They had only met for the first time today, but Lemon and the Crossbow team were acting as if they were all good old friends.

“.....and it’s all thanks to that bastard Dao!”

“Anyone who bet on that asshole must be pissed! If we’re lucky, maybe they’ll kill him in a rage!”

“And they were only one step away from the long-awaited A-Class, too. Aha what a great feeling!”

Many people burst out laughing at that remark as they clinked their glasses together and ate their food.

Thanks to the unexpected complete and total victory, they had received – even after Lemon collected his share – a large sum of prize money. With it, Nami and the other members of Crossbow repaired the broken parts on the old model Savage. They were also able to buy a few high-class computer parts.

As bleak as the day had seemed it had all worked out in the end. And now the future was looking bright.

All in all, they had every reason to celebrate.

Lemon and the maintenance crew belted out lyrics to some national war song – making sure everyone heard them– as they steadily made their way across the cheaply made floorboards.

“Boss! You took some good photos, right!? You’re sure to get that Peanut prize now, aren’t ya?!”

“A ha ha ha ha! That’s just the thing; I was so preoccupied with watching the match that I completely forgot to take any pictures!” Lemon laughed.

“Then, you can take pictures of my Kami-san! I’m tellin’ you, she’s beautiful!”

“Liar!” Ash, the mechanic, cut in, “Kami-san weighs over 80 kilos! How the hell is she beautiful!? Cut the crap! A picture of her wouldn’t be worth anything!”

“At the most it would be worth a Raspberry award!” someone else added.

“Isn’t that a movie award!?”

“Who cares! Bartender! Another round!”

Sagara Sousuke, holding a glass of mineral water, was sitting sullenly in a corner of the pub and watching the group continue their incoherent conversation at a distance.

The pub was cheap. There were huge holes in the walls that were patched up with iron sheets, and the roof was in a similar state. The roof must have leaked pretty badly during the rainy season. The naked, hanging light bulbs and the weak, flickering lights from the kitchen microwaves provided just enough lighting to see the worn-out Thailand movie poster and a painting of some unknown landscape on the wall. Random decorations of artificial flowers and beads glittered throughout the room. Meanwhile, a

subtle stench was seeping through the thin wall that separated the inside of the pub from the alley outside. To put it bluntly, the pub was disgusting – but Sousuke didn't really care.

Nami broke away from the drinking and singing group and, without any hesitation, sat beside Sousuke with her back to the wall just like him.

“Having fun?” she asked.

“Affirmative,” answered Sousuke, sipping his water.

“Strange English.”

“I said it correctly.”

Nami laughed. Sousuke didn't take any offense.

“You're Japanese right?”

“Correct.”

“Were you in the Japanese Army?”

“No. Such a career isn't possible for someone my age. Besides, Japan doesn't have an 'Army.' They have a 'Self-defense Force' organization.”

“What's the difference?”

“I'm not sure. It has to do with some legal interpretation problems though. Probably because they are a defeated country.”

“Oh.”

Nami quietly wondered how the topic she had started so casually had turned in to such a formal conversation.

“Where did you learn about AS technology?”

“Afghanistan.” Sousuke replied simply, “The first AS I piloted was the same model as the one I operated today. It was approximately 6 or 7 years ago. Since then I've learned maintenance and servicing of other AS models from all over the place. RK-91 and RK-92 Savage. Mistral. Cyclone. Bushnell. Gernsback– “

“‘Gernsback'? The M9?”



“I lied. Just forget it.”

“...?”

The M9 Gernsback – the first of its kind – was the latest and most powerful AS that was officially undergoing OPEVAL (operational evaluation) by the United States Forces. Super high performance, super expensive. Even if it were second-hand, any pilot would be extremely lucky to control such power and maneuverability in combat. From what she’d read about it – assuming the data in the specialized magazines was to be trusted – it wouldn’t be unreasonable to describe this new model as a ‘monster.’ But even that one word description doesn’t do the M9 justice.

There was no way some mercenary brat could have experience operating a state-of-the-art AS like the M9.

“Afghanistan you say? They have Japanese immigrants there?”

“No.”

“But you said you were Japanese. How did you get there?”

“There are various reasons.”

“Doesn’t your story seem a bit strange? No matter how I see it, you and I are roughly the same age. Plus, back then, regular armies were the only ones that had access to Savages.”

“That information is incorrect. The Guerrilla forces used ASes they stole from the Soviet forces. I have been a soldier and pilot since I was young – for as long as I can remember.”

“Oh, I see– wait, Guerrilla?! Why would a Japanese kid become an Afghani Guerrilla –”

Nami cut herself off when she noticed Sousuke casting his eyes to the floor silently.

“I’m sorry. I’m being too nosy.”

“It’s fine.” Sousuke shook his head then looked at Nami.

“Do you mind if I ask you a question?”

“Sure. What is it?”

“You’re young. That in itself is not unusual in a town like this. However, getting your hands on an AS, even in this place, is very difficult. Where did you get that AS?”

It was a reasonable question. In fact, it was a question everyone she met usually asked. Having nothing to hide, Nami obediently answered.

“I picked it up after my home town was destroyed.”

It had only happened one or two years ago, but she talked about it as if it happened decades ago.

“It was collapsed and abandoned on its back in one of the crop field ditches, blocking the way completely. Diesel oil leaking from the tank severely damaged the crops. Not that it mattered... by that time most of the townspeople had fled or were dead.”

“A war?”

“Yes. A war between Government troops and Rebel Forces. National Troops were appearing all over the Country, burning villages and towns, and snatching away property and assets as they saw fit. Men were conscripted into the army and sent far away to fight, never to be seen again. Women...were abducted, beaten, and raped by soldiers who were saying the towns needed to earn their food and board somehow. But that’s pretty common in situations like that.”

“You managed to stay safe.”

“I was lucky. When my town was attacked, I was visiting the neighboring village. When I returned—”

The scene that welcomed her home back then flashed before her eyes. She thought she had finally reached the point where she could talk about it easily. But it looked like that was

impossible after all. Creasing her brow, Nami shook her head, attempting to shake off the looming shadows of that nightmare from her mind.

“That Savage had helped reduce more than half of the town to ashes. And for some reason the pilot had abandoned it. It had been shot – there were bullet holes scattered here and there – but it could still move. I claimed it, even though the surviving townspeople were dead set against the idea.”

Nami gazed up at the ceiling.

“But, I want to rebuild that Town.”

The bitter memories would never fade. Nor would the faces of the townspeople who died. Faces forever frozen in despair, fear and surprise.

“That’s why I came to Namsak. I needed to find a way for one young girl to earn a large income. Not like those pitiful children that tend to live in places like this, standing on street corners, selling their bodies and doing everything necessary to earn every bit of money they can. And still all they can afford to wear are worn-out rag-like clothes.

“But the Arena is different. Today’s winnings were pretty impressive, right? As long as you have the skill to win, you can earn an amazing amount of money. Especially if your team advances to A-Class status.”

“I see.”

“With the money I earn here, I can restore the desolated crop fields and repair the roads and bridges too. I’m sure the surviving townspeople will come back if I do that. If that happens – I could go back to school there. That’s what I’m aiming for anyway.”

“School?”

“Yeah. It was the only school in the town. The building was destroyed in the bombing, and the kind teacher was killed when the ASeS attacked, but it really was a good school.”

“A good school...” Sousuke muttered and looked down. His voice held a tinge of longing – as though he was homesick. Memories of a faraway place played through his mind. Memories of a completely different world he knew well, but could not be a part of.

“Uh-huh, it was a good school. They took me in, even though I was part foreign blood.”

“You’re part Japanese?”

“How could you tell?”

“You’re name isn’t very common.”

“Yeah, apparently my father was a Japanese business-man, or something. I don’t know if that’s true, but that’s what my deceased mother told me. She died before the town was destroyed. She stepped on a mine.”

Sousuke murmured something, but because he was taking a sip of his water, all Nami could hear was ‘history...’

“What’d you say?”

“I said, every human being has a history.”

“I like that. It’s a good saying.”

“But it’s only common sense.”

Nami smiled and laughed.

“Yeah, I guess it is... what the–, Monsieur! Master Lemon!” Nami shouted toward the group of men.

“Are you making excuses for sabotaging your own work? Shouldn’t you be collecting data for your story before you get pissed-drunk?”

“Wha? It’s no use Nami-chan. I can’t when it’s so dark out! A ha ha ha ha ha! Come over here, come on!” said a very drunk

Lemon as he raised his glass of beer in good humor and beckoned Nami over.

“You see, I can collect data this way too. Like, for example, your bust-waist-hip measurements ha ha ha ha! No, just kidding. That’s rude.”

All the men burst into laughter.

“That’s fine, Monsieur! Listen! Measure if you like! Go on, get measuring!” Nami answered with a teasing smile

“I would never ‘cause you see, I am a gentleman – somewhat anyway. Why Nami-chan, that AS? ...wait, I meant, why do you have a robot? I really want to know. It’s for my research! See? I can do my job just fine”

“Why don’t you ask Sagara? He knows the story now, he can tell you.”

“Aah! Sagara-kun you know? Not fair. Tell me too, ‘kay? Please?”

“I don’t mind... but the problem is whether or not you will remember it tomorrow morning.” Sousuke said seriously.

Lemon, who strongly reeked of liquor, promptly bounded over and embraced Sousuke. Sousuke just grimaced and turns his face away so he didn’t have to smell Lemon’s breath.



It was well past midnight before the celebration was over.

Since Lemon was so drunk that he couldn’t even walk straight, it was decided that Ash, the mechanic, would accompany him back to his hotel to make sure he got there safely. After that, everyone went their separate ways. Sousuke’s hotel was on the way to Nami’s place, so they walked part of the way together. They passed the still bustling red-light district, and when they

reached the quiet –unattended– park, the two of them went their separate ways.

“There is no match scheduled this week,” Nami said before they parted, “but we have a lot to do tomorrow. There are various part-buying and maintenance processes you have to learn about. Come to the AS hanger by noon tomorrow, Okay?”

“Roger.”

“Goodnight.”

After giving him an exaggerated salute, Nami walked away. When she glanced back she could see Sousuke’s figure standing before the entrance to the cheap hotel.

She kept walking for a while after that.

The apartment she called home was only four blocks away. It may have been a small, old, and uncomfortable room, but nevertheless it was always there waiting for her when she returned home. All she wanted was to go home and relax. She was dead tired from the, all together, stressful day she had.

This neighborhood was only a little ways away from the red-light district, but it was fairly quiet right now. It was almost unbelievable that the daytime hustle and bustle could quiet down enough at nighttime for one to think clearly. A dirty old taxicab passed her by and music blared through the open window, but the tune faded into the night air as the taxi drove away.

Sensing someone watching her, Nami suddenly looked around.

“.....”

She didn’t see anyone. No–

Suddenly, a man emerged from the alley right next to the sidewalk and grabbed Nami’s arm. She instinctively tried to shake free, but the man’s grip was too strong.

“Didn’t you know it’s dangerous walking alone at night?”
He whispered into her ear.

“!?”

A moment later her attacker’s face became visible. She knew the hideously deformed scar on his cheek as well as that pigheaded voice and that arrogant way of speaking.

It was Dao.

Had he been following her since she left the bar so he could ambush her? Nami didn’t dare take her eyes off of Dao. He had a large piece of abrasive plaster on his nose. He also had bandages wrapped around his head. Both injuries were most likely the results of today’s match.

Dao wasn’t alone. Three other men, mechanics from Dao’s team, surround her completely. The triumphant look they had on their faces would make one think they had caught over a hundred enemies in their trap, instead of just one woman.

“I didn’t get a chance to thank you for today, so I came by to express my gratitude. Understand?”

“Geh...”

“Whoa there. You’re carrying a pistol, aren’t ya? Where are you hiding it? Here? Or here?”

Dao persistently ran his hands across her waist, thighs, and crotch in search of the revolver even though she knew for a fact that he had detected it in her pocket a while ago.

“Oh, found it!... good grief. A kid shouldn’t be carrying such a thing.”

Dao took the revolver and shoved it into his pocket easily.

Nami’s voice trembled with a mix of anger, fear, and hatred. “Is the defeated dog getting his revenge? You really are rotten. You pathetic bastard—!”

A hand struck her hard across the cheek.

“Agh!”

He hit her again. A muffled moan escaped her before she had the chance to stop it.



“Let me warn you, every time you say vulgar words like ‘Defeated dog’ or ‘Pathetic bastard’, I’ll automatically hit you. If I don’t like your tone of voice, I’ll hit you. Even if you say nothing at all, if I feel like it, I’ll hit you. Those are the rules. Understand?”

“.....”

“Good girl. A while ago, at the Arena, I told you ‘I don’t like you.’ That was a lie. In truth, your beauty makes me shiver in excitement. Do you understand? Like this—”

Nami’s head was yanked back forcibly by the hair – exposing her entire throat – and a sense of dread slammed into her. Dao ran his tongue along the muscles of her neck. All the air left her lungs in an instant, and – of its own accord – a scream ripped from her throat.

“Ah, delicious. But, relax. We’ll get along just fine. I’ll use anything, even drugs, to make you my woman.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me! I’d rather die—”

Another slap across the face.

“I told you the rules didn’t I? Ah, here they come. That’s our ride.”

A second-hand station wagon pulled up and Dao’s friends were driving it. When the car stopped in front of them, one of Dao’s lackeys opened the back-seat door quickly.

“Oh, by the way. About that brat you hired as your pilot. I don’t know his name, but I had that guy followed.”

“Wh-!”

“You seem worried. I didn’t order anything in particular. But – well, it’s possible that that idiot is dead in that cheap hotel, with his head shoved in the toilet. Even if that’s the case, I’m not taking responsibility. It’s a shame we’ll be making work troublesome for the policemen though.”

“You’re inhuman! Fucking bastard! God damn you! He only fought in the match, because you killed my pilot! He had nothing to do with this! You—”

Two consecutive backhands across her face stopped Nami’s rant short. As promised he had hit her, twice in a row.

“Yes he did, he played a big part. He humiliated me in front of everyone didn’t he? Acting so high and mighty. Right about now, he’s probably kissing the inside of a toilet bowl with his arms and legs flailing,” Dao said, and his lackeys guffawed and laughed.

Then—

“So, is that what happened to me?”

Everyone turned to the new voice, and there, standing in the shadows on the sidewalk, was Sagara Sousuke.

“You must be Dao. Your friend is sleeping with his head in the toilet.”

“.....what’d you say?”

“Release her. Get in the car and leave. I’ve also been through a lot lately. So if possible, I would like to avoid any trouble.”

Dao threw his head back and laughed, causing his grotesque face to warp even further.

“You intend to negotiate? You’ve got guts, kid. You should have escaped alone while you had the chance—”

Even if I do want your help, Dao is completely right, Nami thought.

“It’s dangerous! Run away! It’s better if at least one of us escapes...” Nami cried out as complicated feelings stirred within her.

“I can’t do that. You’re my boss after all,” Sousuke answered calmly, and Dao gave the signal to attack.

“You’ll regret that decision,” Dao said.

Knives and pipes gleamed in the moonlight. Sousuke sighed as the men stepped forward.

It was a long suffering sigh.

“Good grief... it’s hectic right from the first day,” he muttered, and took a fighting stance.

There were four people in front of him and two men in the car.

There were no firearms, but his opponents were armed with iron pipes and knives. Some of them had had military training and were holding the knives in a backhand grip and the iron pipes like baseball bats with their hands separated slightly. Against that, one unarmed punk wouldn't stand a chance.

Even Nami could understand that.

Civil war and border disputes had continued in that area for a long time. Most of the young men that lived there were masters at handling weapons. Murder was practically an art form in that place. That's why street fights there were completely different from those that took place in some towns in peaceful countries. This fight would get ugly.

Surprisingly, the confrontation between Sousuke and the others ended rather quickly.

"How troublesome."

When Dao attacked, Sousuke dodged easily, grabbed Dao's wrist, and snatched the knife away so quickly that those watching couldn't see what happened until it was too late. Sousuke twisted and pinned Dao's arm behind his back, mercilessly pressing the stolen knife against Dao's throat.

"...!!"

15cm below the ear, half of the blade sunk into the flesh, however there was little bleeding. Dao wasn't dead yet, either. His ugly face was distorted more by surprise than fear as his eyes widened and stared in shock.

"You'd better not move," Sousuke informed Dao's lackeys as he turned himself and Dao to face them.

"Respiratory tract. Nerves. Carotid artery. I avoided them entirely when I cut you. However, if any of you try anything..."

“Wh...!?”

“Do you understand? You’ll either die drowning in your own blood, or you’ll live and be bedridden for the rest of your life.”

Everyone froze. That town’s tropic heat was terribly humid and muggy, but in that small area alone it was completely different. Everyone there could swear the temperature had just dropped at least ten degrees.

“Give up on the girl. The team too. Never get involved with them again. Swear it and I’ll release you. This compromise is more than fair, considering you’re Rick’s murderer. How’s that?”
Sousuke asked.

“...che”

“Swear it slowly. An artery is already damaged.”

“...I...I swear...to not...meddle...with...th...them an...anymore...” Dao replied, breaking into a cold sweat while he did so, he looked like he was close to wetting his pants.

“How about the rest of you?”

Startled, the other men exchanged significant looks, and with expressions of disgust they reluctantly, but unanimously, conceded.

“We get it. We give our word.”

“You win.”

“So let Dao go.”

Watching them cautiously Sousuke removed the knife from Dao’s throat.

“Leave,” Sousuke said, and poked Dao in the back with the knife.

Dao staggered forward unsteadily and, supported by his men, he was taken to the car. Casually, one of the men stayed behind waiting for a chance for Sousuke to drop his guard, but there wasn’t the slightest bit of an opening. Sousuke just stared at

him calmly. The look was fairly unsettling and, shivering uneasily, the man edged backwards awkwardly.

“What are you looking at?” The man stuttered weakly. “C-creepy bastard.”

The insult was as pathetic as a coward’s fleeing remark.

The car engine roared to life and once all the men were inside – before the doors were even closed – the car took off down the road toward the city-center of Namsak.

“I’m Sorry,” Sousuke told Nami as he watched and made sure the tail lights disappeared into the distance.

“Wh...why are you apologizing?”

“I probably should have killed him after all. He doesn’t seem like the kind of person that will back down quietly.”

Nami watched his profile as he gave his reason, and some feeling awoke inside her.

In a punk fight in some other peaceful town, this fight might not have been sensibly resolved with one or two exchanged curses. That’s because they wouldn’t realize Sousuke’s strength. But for those who grew up in battle, like Nami, Dao, and the others who live in Namsak, they understood it well.

Sousuke was strong.

He clearly had an experience of bloodshed that others just couldn’t compare to. If the enemy had five or ten men, he could still have silenced them.

It wasn’t only his body language or the way he spoke. During the fight his behavior was relaxed – not showing even the slightest bit of tension – wasn’t that appearance enough to indicate the power he possessed?

“I wonder,” Nami finally answered while quieting down her excited feelings. “It’s true that your opponents were idiots, but do you really think they didn’t realize how strong you are?”

“That’s only speculation, I am only one man, after all,” Sousuke said. “I know all too well, there is only so much one soldier can do.”

Strangely enough, his voice was slightly forlorn and self-mocking.

“Humility...man, that’s an extreme weakness. I don’t understand you more and more.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah, but thank you for saving me.”

Considering the fact that she was always acting tough with the people around her, and saying stuff like ‘Help? I don’t need it’, she was pretty shocked herself that her eyes and body could express her gratitude so genuinely.

“You’re my boss. One should protect their employer.”

“...That’s the only reason?”

“Also because you are a good woman.”

He said this with such a serious face, Nami was taken aback.

“Uh, um w-what... do you mean by that?...”

“I mean you are a good person. That’s what I’ve thought since you told me your story at the pub.”

“Ah, that...”

Way to completely ruin the mood, Nami grumbled internally.

“As I thought, I don’t understand you at all. You’re just too.....weird.”

“Weird?”

“Uh-huh, weird. Really weird.”

“I’ve been called that before.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me.....Hah-, ha ha ha ha!”

After laughing for a while, Nami calmed down enough to say, "... well, this street seems to be dangerous at night. Will you be walking this helpless, beautiful girl back to her home?"

Sousuke did escort her home, but left immediately afterwards. There was nothing she needed to worry about. He just wasn't interested in that sort of thing.

Oh well...

A lot had happened in one day. Nami's adrenaline was still pumping. She really needed to cool her head and get a good night's sleep.

After having a cold shower, Nami put on underwear and a tank top and climbed into bed.

The moment her head hit the pillow, the doorbell rang.

It couldn't be Dao and his lackey's again, could it?

Nami got up and silently padded over to the door.

Unlocking it, she opened the door cautiously and peered outside.

Standing right in front of her doorway was none other than Sagara Sousuke – knapsack and a big heavy duffle bag in hand.

"Wh-what's the matter?"

"I was kicked out of the hotel. I need a place to stay."

The hotel owner had found out that Sousuke had nearly killed the member of Dao's gang, who had attacked him, and left him in one of the hotel's toilets. When Sousuke had returned, the hotel owner had told him, "Leave."

"...b-but. You see? I-... by my-... but I live alone," Nami managed to say. Suddenly she remembered her state of dress – she was half naked! – and quickly hid behind the door.

"I know that," Sousuke answered, clearly not seeing what the problem was. "It will be more convenient in case Dao and his friends decide to target you again. I'll become your bodyguard. I don't mind if you subtract the lodging fees from my pay."



“Eh, but, um, something like that is...”

“You don’t want to?”

“...I understand what you’re saying, and it makes sense.
But, you see? This kind of thing... isn’t it strange?”

“I’m not sure what you mean. Perhaps you would like it if
it was me along with another person?”

“Eh? No, that’s not what I meant-... *sigh*, whatever.”

Hearing the vague, hurried reply, Sousuke nodded.

“Understood. Then, get dressed.”

“Huh?”

“I’m going to Lemon’s place. You’re coming too. His hotel is some distance from here, so it will be difficult to run there if you’re wearing that.”

“Eeehh? Why do I have to”

“I’ll lodge here then.”

“Ah, geez.”

Nami finally gave in and headed over to where Lemon was staying, trying to fight off her drowsiness during the 1 km walk through Namsak at night.

The next morning, Michael Lemon woke up from his half-dead drunken stupor to find Nami sleeping peacefully in bed beside him, wearing only her underwear.

“Eh? No way! What? EEEHH!?”

I got drunk and slept with a minor?! Lemon panicked at the thought. Face draining of color, Lemon let out a shriek as he scrambled off the bed, and landed in a heap on the floor.

Ok, now he was really confused.

Lemon took in the scene as he stared underneath the bed.

Sagara Sousuke was sleeping soundly under the bed.

His eyes slid half open, sending Lemon an enquiring look.

And in one hand he grasped a knife.



When all was said and done, Nami and Sousuke ended up living together with Lemon.

Surprisingly this wasn't a result of Sousuke's insistence, it was Nami's. This way she didn't have to worry about Dao targeting her again and the hotel Lemon was currently staying in was considered high-class in that town. It was simply too good of an opportunity to pass up. This ulterior motive on her part, of course, was more than clear.

"Look, I'm pretty," Nami informed Lemon nonchalantly. "It wouldn't look good if a girl like me lived alone with a man. I'm Catholic. So, if the three of us live together, that shouldn't be a problem – that's what I think anyway."

"You have nothing to worry about, because I'm not that kind of guy at all," Lemon answered.

"Then do you want to kick Sousuke out and have you and me sleep together?"

"You're such a pain."

"I knew it! That's your ulterior motive," Nami laughed.

"Why has it turned out like this!?"

"There, there. It's fine, isn't it? It's only for a little while anyway. That's just how it is. So, look after us, ok? Now that this talk is over, I'm going to borrow your bath."

Ignoring any further objections, Nami made a beeline for the bathroom.

Sousuke was silently unpacking his bags and Lemon's shoulders sagged in defeat. He still had little more than a month scheduled to stay in that town, and he had a feeling both Nami and Sousuke had every intention of rooming with him for the rest of his stay at the hotel.

And so, these three peoples' life together began.

With Nami sleeping on the bed, Lemon on the couch, and Sousuke under the bed.

For some reason, it turned into that kind of an arrangement.



Sousuke's life as a member of team 'Crossbow' officially began. Lemon became the team sponsor, but he was treated more like an errand boy – doing odd chores here and there, and being bossed around by Nami and the others.

The Arena matches usually took place in the evening. The majority of the matches happened on the weekend, leaving the smaller and weaker teams below B-Class competing against each other on the weekdays.

After hiring Sousuke as their pilot, it took team Crossbow approximately one week to get all the RK-91 maintenance done on their Savage. They replaced the highly deteriorated muscle packages with fresh ones, exchanged all the heavily damaged armor-plates with brand new ones, and also completely replaced the faulty parts in the hydraulic system that had been causing the fluid leak. When they were finished, the AS was in much better shape.

Right now, everyone was currently discussing what color they should paint the Savage. The budget had enough of a margin to allow them to buy paint, but they couldn't agree on what color. That was how the huge group argument began. During the confusing uproar, Sousuke quietly left to go shopping and returned to the hangar carrying two cans of paint.

"What's that?"

"You'll see."

Nami asked and Sousuke answered. Without hesitating, he poured the paint and solution into the airbrush gun's cup, put on goggles and a mask, and without permission, walked to the Savage and started painting it.

The color was matte white.

When he was done with the white, he painted the shoulders, elbows, knees, and part of the head a dark – almost black – blue.

Nami watched him work while she ate her lunch. She looked at the ‘white Savage’ and thoughtfully tilted her head to the side.

“It doesn’t look bad or anything... but, doesn’t it make it look weak?”

“It’s the same color as the last AS I operated.”

“Oh.”

“It wasn’t weak. This is a good omen.”

“Y-you sure about that?”

“Yes. Forgive me for being selfish, but from now on I’ll be calling this unit ‘AI II’,” Sousuke said with a nod.

He looked satisfied with the white Savage – he was gazing up at the freshly painted ‘upright frog’ like it was some kind of hero. Coming back to his senses, he noticed everyone was sending him questioning looks.

“Is that weird?”

“Uh-huh,” Everyone answered at the same time flatly. Some ask him to “repaint it”, but Sousuke didn’t yield.

It was rare for a guy so usually reserved to get so insistent over such a thing, and since the paint job didn’t look bad, everyone just decided to let him have his way.

“I guess even he has his cute side,” Lemon whispered to Nami later. “You know, that color makes it look just like a robot from an anime I used watch when I was a kid.”

“Heh, what robot?”

“Goldorak.”

‘Goldorak’ was the name of a Japanese animation that was a big hit in France a while back. Its original Japanese title was

“UFO Robo Grandizer.” The series had been released pre-AS era – before ASes were invented.

“It looks nothing like it.”

“Yeah, I guess not... -wait, how would you know!?”

“I watched it when it was rebroadcast here. But, that doesn’t matter. Get back to work! Work! The next match is tomorrow! Until then, we’re going to work on this guy until he’s completed to perfection!” Nami yelled to the entire crew.

Nami, with wrench in hand and completely revitalized, turned and headed toward the Savage.

The match the next day was a total victory.

As was the next match, and the one after that. Within a month, Crossbow came to be known throughout Namsak as the new rising star.



The ear splitting warning siren wailed.

The roaring engine rattled the cockpit.

Up and down, left and right – from every direction the cockpit shook.

A close up of the opponent’s 2nd generation AS was displayed on the main screen.

Its silhouette was short and stout with angled armor. It didn’t have a head. Instead, it had a sensor turret extending from the body, which often reminded people of a tank or armored car.

The AS – a Mistral II – charged forward swinging the huge grappling hammer it was holding. Sousuke, manipulating his machine smoothly at the last moment, dodged the attack.

Limbs maneuvered accordingly.

The scenery flowed by.

The audiences' enthusiasm penetrated the armor which was reflecting the glaring lights.

Sousuke commanded and moved the master arm effortlessly and the mechanical body responded obediently, cleanly tripping up the Mistral II.

The opponent staggered and tried to regain balance, but it missed its opponent's movements until it was too late. Its left hand was grabbed and yanked in the opposite direction, throwing the off-balance AS down.

To make it interesting, the Mistral II was slammed onto the Arena ground hard.

But the extent of the shock wasn't that terrible, and the Mistral II pilot managed to withstand it.

But it was still flat on its back and vulnerable because the pilot's movements were sluggish due to disorientation. Sousuke didn't hesitate. Showing no mercy, the Savage swung down its boorish weapon – a huge battle axe. Even though it's called an axe, it doesn't cut the opponent. Mostly, it's a weapon very similar to a hammer.

A vital part of the generator was completely destroyed, instantly causing overheating and system failure. White smoke gushed out of the Mistral II's abdomen accompanied by a thunderous roar that rattled the atmosphere.

“Winner! Crossbow!”

At the declaration, the Arena spectators suddenly erupted in cheers. Without responding to the enthusiasm that permeated the Arena, the ‘white Savage’ quickly returned to its paddock.

Over the radio Sousuke could hear Nami and the rest of the team's excitement. Saying things like:

“Thanks for the hard work!”

“You're the real deal, kid!”

“Just a little ways to go till A-Class!”

And so on and so forth.

“No problem,” Sousuke said and reset the AS’ power level to idle.

No problem.

Apparently, this was how he felt. There were times when he felt nothing at all. Neither malice nor pride. No matter how many people lavished him with praise, it didn’t raise even a ripple in Sousuke’s heart.

Especially when it came to battle maneuvering at this level.

That’s just the way he felt about it.

These battles were not real. After all, it was only a sport. Real combat – the area overflowing with killing intent, the sensation of life and death throbbing deep inside your bones right up to the final moment – where a instant feels like a prolonged eternity of tension. These mock battles couldn’t even come close to that.

What exactly am I doing?

Every time he felt so many eyes watching him, he could feel the irritation inside of him expanding. Sousuke just couldn’t fight normally under these conditions.

Even these battles were part of a larger plan though. Leaving Tokyo, drifting to this town, participating in the Arena entertainment – there was a reason behind it all. This was all just the next stage in the plan that would point him in the direction of the greater battle. Sousuke didn’t even have any confidence in whether or not he’d find the enemy. But there was only so much he could do by himself, and he was well aware of that fact.

However, at the same time, Sousuke felt a certain kind of comfort living in Namsak.

For the first time since Sousuke started living in Tokyo, he wasn't facing any hardships. There was no desperate struggle with ancient literature and Japanese history. He could casually reveal his AS operator and self-defense techniques without having to worry that someone would think it was strange. It was a relentless strategy of living naturally in front of a formidable enemy and not confronting it.

Then there was Nami, Lemon, Ash and the maintenance crew.

His relationship with the members of team Crossbow was more similar to the one he had with his 'Mithril' colleagues, rather than the one he had with his friends at school. Naturally, Sousuke had fun in the time he spent with his classmates, but Nami and the others – with their dry humor – were easier for him to talk to. The connection between them wasn't the so-called 'Japanese Passion', the bond they had was more logical. Nami was the owner, Lemon the sponsor, Ash and the others were the crew, and Sousuke was the pilot. A contract bound them together and with that in mind they could keep associating with each other easily.

Living like this wasn't so bad.

Sousuke was surprised he felt that way.

After all, not much time had passed since the incident in Tokyo.

"Sousuke, are you listening?"

Nami's insistent voice over the wireless radio brought Sousuke back to his senses.

"...what?"

"Argh! Hurry up and turn off the engine! Fuel isn't cheap, you moron!"

"Roger. I'm turning it off now."

After making sure the Savage stopped within the parking-pad lines in the paddock, Sousuke cut the diesel engine. Using the power remaining in the condenser, he lowered the AS into the landing position and locked the joints. Then, according to procedure, he turned off the control system.

When he opened the hatch and climbed down from the AS, Ash and the rest of the crew swarmed around him, making a fuss and beaming with joy. Behind them Lemon was busy trying to get his camera quickly, but securely, set up. Lemon had originally planned to take a picture from the audience during the match, but the match had ended – and Sousuke had immediately returned afterwards – before Lemon even had a chance to get his camera ready.

“Jeez, too much running around! Hey, out of the way, out of the way!”

Nami shoved Ash out of her way and stood in front of Sousuke.

Clearing her throat awkwardly she said, “Thanks for your hard work. Here, it’s today’s pay.”

“Right.”

Sousuke accepted the paper currency Nami handed to him.

“Um... it was a good performance.” Nami said, casting her eyes upward, and then as if she was embarrassed about what she said, she hastily retreated deeper into the paddock.

“If I’m not mistaken, she’s becoming quite smitten.” Ash said several days later during lunch at the eating area in the maintenance garage.

Ash was a former maintenance soldier of the East German army. In the early 90’s trouble was occurring in the Soviet Union, but before that devastating storm of purging and oppression swept over Eastern Europe, Western Germany managed to have a

miraculous unification – Ash was one of the only ‘East Germans’ graduating from the east side that failed to get employment. Just before the unification, with the deployment of the RK-89 by the Warsaw Treaty Platoon, he had gained three days of maintenance experience. After that he eventually drifted to this Southeast Asian town, where he now worked for Nami.

“Who is? With who?”

“Nami is, with you.”

“I see. It’s not unreasonable, it’s a definite possibility.”

Sousuke said as if it were nothing, and Ash’s eyes became round.

“Oooh!? Those are strong words, boy!”

“As far as I can tell, compared to the town’s standards, my piloting skills are extremely high. It’s only natural for her, as the owner, to evaluate me.”

“No, that’s not what I meant...” Ashes shoulders slumped in exasperation, “What I meant was that she is becoming fond of you in the same way a woman likes a man.” *Sigh*, “If you watch her you’ll notice Nami’s pretty popular, right? She’s the type of girl that doesn’t care about crude or indecent language. She’s fairly tough no matter what happens. Lots of the guys from the crew, other players too, have made advances on her, and they’ve all been rebuffed. Of course, so have I.”

“I think you’re wrong. She speaks with Lemon longer than she ever speaks to me.” Sousuke said without getting the point.

The three of them were still living together, but most of the time it was Nami and Lemon talking to each other non-stop. By nature, Sousuke was a man of few words. He only spoke when there was something to be said. So usually, unless someone specifically spoke to him, he would not join a conversation. He also wouldn’t argue. All Nami ever said when she came up to him, pushing a pastry or a drink at him was “You want this?”

“That’s just because she can speak comfortably with Master Lemon, right? But when she tries to talk to you, it’s like she can’t find an opening. I find it rather amusing.”

“Isn’t that just me being hated?”

“I don’t think that’s quite it” Ash laughed, “When you’re not around the paddock, do you know what Nami will always ask? ‘Where’s Sousuke?’ She wouldn’t act like that over a guy she doesn’t like.”

“I don’t really understand.”

“How about you, kid?”

“About what?”

“Nami. What do you think of her?” Ash prodded, and Sousuke, for the first time, seriously considers his feelings for her.

I like Nami.

That’s how he probably felt. After all, it was fun when they were together and he could relax when, along with Lemon, the three of them talked about trifling things. He thought Nami was beautiful when she stood before the mirror in the morning, towel drying her hair and tying it into a ponytail before she left to go to the paddock.

Then, why is that? It felt like the hazy feelings he’d been caught in before.

It’s because Nami resembles her. Energetic, knowing compromise, and without mercy, taking refuge in laughing at Sousuke. Carefree. Radiating so much fighting spirit. Maybe he was just naturally weak when it comes to that type of woman.

“It’s possible that I like her,” Sousuke said in a voice that held no significance.

If any woman who knew him heard him say such a thing in that tone, they would become extremely angry. However, no one ever taught Sousuke that yearning for someone earnestly and

wholeheartedly is a virtue. And that's because he had lived in a world that was unrelated to love in itself for so long. The comrades he had had before he had joined Mithril used to say it was like being a sailor. A woman is a port. His comrades had long-distance relationships with their girlfriends. For a man who grew up in such an environment, Sousuke showed Kaname his feelings the only way he knew how, by being exceedingly honest and faithful. That is why he was fighting in this place.

She is the most important to me, Sousuke thought. No one was forcing him, and it had nothing to do with being virtuous.

That was why, in the hand of the Arbalest, descending from the sky via parachute on that Christmas night, he did not avoid answering Tessa Testarossa's question. He probably loved her, that's just how it was. Even now, he still thought that.

Then what if –

If Nami asked him the same question Tessa did, how would he answer?

I don't know. Sousuke was surprised to notice his lack of confidence.

In fact, he was having a hard time even remembering Chidori Kaname's face. It had only been two months. Yet her smiling face – that memory, one that should hold so much value that it was hard to exchange it for another thought, was becoming vague.

I can't remember the color of the shoes she wore so often.

I can't remember which wrist she wore her watch on.

But what shocked Sousuke the most was that he couldn't recall the color of the ribbon she wore in her hair practically every day.

Was the ribbon red?

He thought it might have been red. But, he wasn't completely confident. Maybe it was yellow.

Because of the job he had been doing, those kinds of features should be firmly engraved into his memory – in case it was ever necessary for him to describe her appearance to someone over the radio – to have them at his disposal at any time.

Will it be this fleeting?

Will he lose sight of it so easily?

“What’s with the serious face?” Ash asked after watching Sousuke’s sullen profile. “Did you leave a woman behind in your hometown?”

“No,” He muttered staring at the oil stained concrete floor.

That’s when Nami – the very person they had been talking about – entered the maintenance garage.

“Crap, here she comes.”

With theatrical flair, Ash made a gesture of zipping his mouth shut. Apparently, this conversation would stay between just the two of them.

“Ash! Isn’t lunch break already over? Now get back to work.”

“Aye Aye Ma’am.” Ash stood up with an exaggerated flourish and returned to the AS maintenance area. Nami approached Sousuke as he tidied up the empty lunch containers.

“Sousuke, here.”

She thrust a small slip of paper in front of his face. It was filled with scribbled handwriting that was a far cry from being neat and tidy.

“What’s this?”

“The shopping list. Our maintenance stuff mostly. You and Lemon are going together.”

Taking the memo, Sousuke quietly scanned the list.

“There’s a lot of special AS parts listed here. They are not available in normal shops,” he said.

“What? You haven’t been to the ‘Market’ yet?” Nami frowned.

“Market? I’ve heard of it.”

“You can buy everything on the list there. Just head in the same direction as the eastern pass, the Market is just parallel to it.”



Various carts were clustered together, full of activity. This was a town where all types of equipment were gathered. Its abundance in AS parts could easily be compared to that of an army’s front-line base. The town’s left and right flanks, for roughly 500 meters of open area, was transformed into absolute chaos. This section of Namsak was where AS parts from all over the world were gathered and sold.

This ‘Market’ that Nami spoke of was exactly what made Namsak, Namsak.

Muscle packages made in France. Optic sensors made in the Czech Republic. Titanium frames made in Germany. Cooling units made in Israel. Optical fiber made in Japan. Core processors made in the USA.

One street vendor had a decorated AS wrist on display. And the stall next to it had a bulletin board displaying the vendor’s current inventory in crude chalk handwriting.

[GTTO Corp. genuine / C122 System intervertebral / `95 year system]

[Stress inspection complete / Used Savage femur C frame / Made in China]

[IFAV standard / Rj23 system torque converter / Almost brand-new]

Mixed in with all the AS parts were electronic appliances that had been scrapped and gathered together from around the region. Things like computer parts, DVD and CD software, were vigorously being sold as merchandise to make a profit.

In fact, many of the customers were not even related to the Arena. The electronic products the vendors sold were mostly aimed at ordinary people and tourists.

Some of the people there were most likely from a small developing country. There was a group of Authorized Military Personnel there, too, who were engaged in an awkward business conversation – through an interpreter – with a parts salesman, desperate to obtain parts at a reasonably cheap price.

“It’s kind of like Akihabara.”

Sousuke remembered the hustle and bustle of Electric Town when he had accompanied his classmate back in Tokyo, Shinji Kazuma, on an outing there. Of course, this place wasn’t as big as Akihabara, but it somehow managed to give off the same feeling with its chaotic atmosphere.

Lemon cocked his eyebrow at what Sousuke said.

“Aah, a friend of mine went there when he was sightseeing, and told me about it. He said it’s a famous Porno Town.”

“It’s Electric Town.”

“That’s its old name. Because now it’s only full of hentai manga and Lolita-Complex game porno shops.”

“I don’t know why your friend would think that, but it’s probably just a misunderstanding.”

“You think so?” Lemon said, not really interested, and bit into the red hot and spicy sausage in his hand. He had bought it a while back from one of the market vendors.



“Uwa, hot...”

“Then don’t eat it.”

“No, it’s pretty tasty.”

“I heard the French were epicures.”

“That’s just prejudice. It’s the same as our conversation about Akihabara. For your information, I happen to be a junk food junky.”

“I see,” Sousuke responded absently, pushing forward through the crowded market place.

He could see military equipment and material, as well as AS parts being sold throughout the market with ease. Though he had heard about its reputation, the vigor of this market was beyond what he had imagined.

It’s surprising...

If he had to he would describe this town as a place in the world where battle helicopters and tank parts were often for sale. As far as he knew, based on Nami’s explanation, if you played your cards right, you could even get your hands on some artillery and ammunition. Throughout the world, a town like this was hard to come by.

Access to AS parts and special machine parts had always been persistently restricted. The only means of obtaining them were through specialized arms dealers, and it was at the dealer’s rate, so the majority of the time the buyer had no say in the final price. When Sousuke was hired as a mercenary in Southeast Asia – 2 or 3 years ago – he had no idea such a town existed.

However–

“Since when has the TI Corp.’s gyroscope been \$400?”
Sousuke asked with a bit of a sigh, looking at a street vendor’s signboard.

“Is that expensive?”

“No, the opposite. The lowest I’ve known it to be is \$2000. That’s what it was at a year ago when we bought a dozen of them.”

“Wow. It’s really cheap now,” Lemon said with interest.

“For a machine the AS is pretty widespread, isn’t it? I guess business is booming.”

“It’s not that simple.”

Sousuke suddenly remembered the words of Andrei Kalinin. It was still unknown whether that man was alive or dead.

“This world is abnormal—”

Those words from so long ago come rushing back to him, and resound loudly in his head.

The speed the current AS was spreading across the world was of a level that even he – a member of the younger generation – found strange. Especially recently, he’d been feeling this way more and more.

Compared to the evolution pace of other weapon systems, wasn’t the AS’ too abnormal?

The people in this market could never imagine the extent of power of the latest experimental machine– This was Sousuke’s opinion after his experience in piloting Arbalest, which had the ‘Lambda Driver’ installed on board, so of course Sousuke knew it well. As someone who understood the advanced AS technology, by watching these people in the market who had no clue, Sousuke realized just how unnatural that technology was.

Why? Why is it so urgently spreading to that extent?

That’s how he felt. He was just one soldier, he understood without having to think about it, that he was someone who didn’t have any particular power in this world, but Sousuke vaguely – and perhaps inevitably – sensed some kind of ‘hidden motives’ in the mists.

It was possible that everyone in Mithril felt the same way.

That something was strange.

It couldn't be said exactly what, therefore no one spoke of it. The degree of malaise – *bi bi*, the electric blip sound, was Sousuke's only warning.

Lemon had taken a picture of Sousuke's profile with his digital camera.

"...taking a picture without saying anything first. Isn't that more than a little rude?"

Sousuke stared at him suspiciously and Lemon gave him a one-shouldered shrug.

"Ha ha. I wouldn't get any good photos if I worried about being rude and getting permission."

"In other words, you're particular with your work."

"That's right. I'm a little bit of an artist."

"Using a pocket-sized digital camera can't really be considered art."

It was said in ill humor, causing Lemon to give a strange laugh.

"If I'm in a perfectly good studio, drooling over the supermodels I'm taking pictures of, then that's a different story. However, if I'm flying across the world, this is better. If I bring a single-lens reflex camera, sooner or later someone would end up stealing it. I'm happy as long as it works."

"That makes sense."

"3 million pixels is plenty. It's my art." Lemon wasn't gloating, he was just being honest. Brimming with curiosity Lemon continued to stare at Sousuke, "I'm interested in your art of combat."

"....."

"You're no run of the mill boy-soldier. That's what I think every time I see you fighting in the Arena. Simply put, you don't

fight solely for the sake of making a living. Your real objective is something much grander – it's something that's still far in the distance. If that wasn't the case, then you wouldn't be able to fight the way you do. That's what it looks like to me.”

Sousuke's eyes met Lemon's gaze for an instant.

Right then, for the very first time, Sousuke became keenly aware that Michael Lemon was not just the happy-go-lucky reporter he appeared to be. The eyes behind the glasses were intelligent, and seeming to know that a judgment was being passed, Lemon looked Sousuke straight in the eye.

“I have a hunch that your splendid way of fighting is not just normal combat skills. I sense it as a photographer. It's almost like it's a form of art. When you're piloting an AS, even an amateur like me can sense it. I know you can handle things by yourself.”

“..... I guess so,” Sousuke muttered as if it were someone else's affair, “It's true that it's the only thing I do with pride.”

That's just the way he was.

Photography, drawing, modeling, and music. Sousuke had met many people in Tokyo that had some kind of talent they expressed themselves through. They wanted to be rich, exquisite, to have people's hearts dance when they showed them their talent.

Then what do I have?

He thought he had nothing. But from a different perspective, that may not be the case.

Combat.

Combat had been the only way he had had to express himself. Was dancing through gunfire and being immersed in battle and destruction, truly the only way he could express himself?

Kaname.

Then Chidori, that time I—

Sousuke's chest tightened at the dark thought.

"Uh...sorry. It wasn't my intention for the conversation to become so deep."

Suddenly...

Behind them on the road, two police cars with sirens blaring screeched to a stop. People who had been shopping in the market that evening had either scattered away or stopped to watch, as soon as they had seen the patrol cars coming.

"Huh?"

Two officers jumped out of the patrol cars, immediately drawing their revolvers out of their holsters. Using the bullet proof cars and their doors as cover – they aimed their guns at Sousuke and Lemon!

"Freeze!" Surprised, Lemon automatically tried to take cover behind a nearby merchant stall, but Sousuke stopped him.

"It's better to do as they say."

"Eh?...A-alright."

Lemon answered timidly. Then he straightened his back, hardened his face, and stood firmly beside Sousuke as the policeman barked more orders.

"Slowly put both hands above your heads where we can see them! Turn and face your backs to us, then kneel on the ground and cross your ankles! That's it, nice and slow."

"Uh, Mr. Policeman?" Lemon ventured. "I think there's been some kind of mistake—"

"Hurry it up!"

"*Sigh.* Slowly or quickly, make up your mind already..."

Grumbling quietly to himself, Lemon obeyed the officer's instructions. Sousuke did too.

A third police car pulled up.

Sousuke and Lemon were forced down into a submissive position – lying flat on their stomachs with their faces in the damp and humid road – making it impossible for them to see the policeman getting out of the third car.

The heels of his boots made a dull *thunk* sound on the ground as the newcomer approached.

He had sharp, slit, up-turned eyes. Yet, contrary to the glint in his eyes, his appearance left the opposite impression. His cheeks were round and bulging and it was hard to tell where his neck and shoulders begin. He was short with excess flab that swelled over the belt around his waist. It was almost like they were watching a pig standing up right and trying to act intelligent. That was the first impression they had of the uniformed man standing before them.

“It was reported that a pair of young foreigners were stealing from the market. This information is from a ‘highly reliable’ source,” the man said. His voice was high-pitched and annoying.

“We came as quickly as we could, and I’m delighted that we caught the suspects so unpredictably fast. But, this is regrettable. Who would have thought that the suspects would be members of the team that performs so splendidly in the Arena...”

It was a ridiculous story. The charges were clearly completely false. At once, Lemon lashed out, yelling angrily from his face down position on the ground.

“Huh? What the hell!? When someone murdered Rick you couldn’t have cared less, even when we... ugh!”

One of the officers grabbed Lemon’s throat tightly and forced his face into the ground, Lemon released a groan at the harsh treatment.

“Be good and stay quiet, foreigner. I am only doing my duty,” The man said and the others chuckled.



“..... you, the one who’s so eager to do his duty, who are you?” Sousuke asked in a tone that suggested he was very bored, causing the man’s violet lips to twist slightly.

“It’s not necessary for you to know, foreigner. You can simply call me ‘Chief’.”

“That’s helpful, it’s easy to remember.”

“Then, it’s another unexpected delight.”

The Chief twisted his lips once more and his slim tongue darted out and licked his lips, before it disappeared back into his mouth.

“You should remember this though. After this, if you take that haughty attitude with me—”

Swinging his, polished-to-a-shine, boot he aimed to kick Sousuke’s face, but just grazed his cheek.

Lowering himself onto one knee, the Chief stooped down close and whispered into Sousuke’s ear, “Next time I won’t miss, okay? Sagara Sousuke-kun?”

Chapter 3: Real Bout

“Get out. You’re next.”

The command was followed by the harsh sound of screeching metal. Opening the rusted jail door, the jailer entered the detention cell to drag Sousuke out.

An evening had already passed since they had been arrested.

An unjust arrest by the police based on fabricated evidence. But in a third world country, something like that was a common occurrence.

The detention cell was filthy, and it didn’t surprise Sousuke in the least. *Sigh, it could be worse*, was the first thing he thought when he first saw the cell. That was, of course, assuming that the cell was the worst room to spend the night in.

The walls and floor were damp and stained with filth. The cell was teeming with a heavy stench, and a noisy buzz of flies zipping around echoed through the cell. The cell was lit by only one beam of sunlight that was shining in from a grate close to the ceiling and out of reach.

It was said that if someone stayed there for 3 days and nights, they’d suddenly become ill in either body or mind. Actually, all the occupants of the cell were men, and most of them had too skinny shoulders that shook from the cold, and they muttered to themselves deliriously non-stop.

Sousuke was the only one they were summoning. Lemon, who was caught along with Sousuke, was left behind to mingle with the other prisoners. He watched Sousuke leave with a mix of fatigue and anxiety in his eyes.

“Sousuke.”

“Don’t worry,” is all Sousuke said before he stepped out of the multi-prisoner cell. Hands cuffed behind his back, Sousuke was escorted to an interrogation room located on the second floor of the police station.

Even though it was called an interrogation room, the only things in the room were a pair of pipe chairs and a naked light bulb hanging from the ceiling.

Many dark red stains decorated the bare concrete walls. More than likely blood that splattered during ‘Police questioning’ between the officers and prisoners. It was not just blood. In the corners of the room, blending in with the dust and rubbish, there was something that looked like brown pebbles scattered around.

Those – would be teeth.

Were they pulled out with pliers? Or were they knocked loose from being hit too hard? How many “guests” must there have been in order for so many teeth to be collected? Did they leave the room like this, without cleaning it, in hopes of fanning the next victim’s fear? He wondered silently.

But rather than being affected by the dreary scene, Sousuke was strangely nostalgic.

It’s true it was strange. Considering that place was supposed to be his own personal graveyard.

Nevertheless. He couldn’t help what thoughts passed through his mind.

A warm Tokyo apartment. A classroom overflowing with light. A good home-cooked meal and the feeling of laughter. Those, of course, were happy memories. But it was a world he no longer belonged to. Especially the way he was right now.

He must become a weapon.

A precise weapon that operates flawlessly.

The interrogation room was nothing special, except for the ruins of pain. Expressionlessly, Sousuke sat in one of the chairs and fixed his gaze on a spot on the wall. His heart slowly became cold, and his feelings became dry.

His eyes stared blankly, and his nerves sharpened.

Sharper. Colder.

In that way he turned back into “Kashim”.

It was a process he had been perfecting little by little, ever since he left Tokyo. It was essential for him to do so. Even if it had been a hindrance while living with Nami and Lemon.

After waiting for roughly an hour, a man finally entered the room.

It was “Chief”.

He walked casually with purposely-slow steps. Is this how the stupid man walks in order for it to be understood who’s in control here? The wide trousers – which had plenty of extra room for his overly large buttocks – and riding boots he was wearing remind Sousuke of a cold-blooded German Nazi officer.

“Burglary, assault, attempted murder.” the Chief listed, “Blackmail, false testimony, illegal immigration, illegal gambling conduct, article forgery, interference with a government official in the execution of his duties, and possession of illegal weapons... is there anything else you would like to add?”

“What is that?”

“Your charges, Sagara Sousuke. Estimated to get you at least 48 years of penal imprisonment. That’s almost half a century...”

“How about ‘Assaulting an Executive Officer.’ I can put it into practice right now.”

The Chief’s jaw spasmed in annoyance. A large police officer standing nearby stepped forward and immediately hit

Sousuke across the face. As expected, the officer held nothing back, and the blow was painful. Sousuke was hit so hard that his whole torso twisted sideways from the blow, and his body leaned backwards. Just when he was on the verge of falling off the chair, Sousuke was roughly grabbed by his shirt collar and pulled back into his seat by the same officer that hit him.

“Somehow I don’t think you understand the situation.”

“.....tsk.”

“This is not simply just an interrogation room. It is also the court. It is the place where punishment is executed. I am the public Prosecutor. I am also the Judge. As well as the Executive Officer.”

“Wow, you seem to be extremely under-staffed,” Sousuke muttered the sarcastic remark with difficulty. The inside of his mouth was bloody, and a broken molar was tumbling around his tongue. He considers spitting it out, but, not wanting to give the room another trophy, he swallowed it instead.

“What do you want? There must be something you wanted to discuss, or else you wouldn’t have brought me up here just to inform me of a 50 year penal imprisonment sentence.”

“You’ve got good judgment,” the Chief laughed, causing the fat of his stomach and chin to jiggle back and forth. “It’s the Arena.”

“.....”

“You’ve been on a winning streak right from your debut match, and it seems your team will be promoted soon, correct? Your skill is building quite the reputation, even among the Match-makers. If you’re promoted to A-Class, and you obtain sufficient funding, it’s only a matter of time before you reach the top.”

“That’s the idea.”

“That would be a problem.” the Chief casually took off his regulation cap and wiped his receding hairline. “The Arena holds

many flourishing teams. The balance of victories is good, and by managing the position of an Ace Pilot appropriately, the audience can continue to enjoy the game forever. Efficient management. Stable entertainment characteristics. With this, we enjoy a large profit. Understand?"

Sousuke understood the emphasis with which the Chief said "we" perfectly.

The Arena's Management Committee. Match-makers. Merchants supplying AS parts. Influential people in the town. – It was all a Bureaucratic Organization within a Crime Syndicate. They all gathered around this competition, where a vast amount of money was flowing, to get sweet deals.

"Dao and his team were B-Class, but they worked well for me, keeping the order. And – Sagara Sousuke – you are about to disturb that order. That is the reason why you have been summoned to this room. I hope we can come to a mutual understanding. After all, don't you think it's best to make 'adjustments' in order to secure your own future?"

"So that's how it is."

"Adjustments" – in other words, a fixed match. Or something slightly different but along those same lines.

"Meaning, if I don't comply, I'll get 50 years of penal imprisonment?"

"The Frenchman too. It would be good to include your friend, the young girl owner, too. There's no need to explain to you how those bored prison guards and prisoners would treat a young girl like her, is there? When you're in this town it's not a good idea to cross me."

Even when Lemon and Nami were threatened, Sousuke didn't lose his cool. On the contrary, he was seriously considering,

with his hands cuffed behind his back, whether or not he could kill the two officers and the Chief.

Yes, he could.

If he killed the three men and removed the handcuffs, he wondered if he could commandeer a weapon and escape.

It wouldn't be that difficult.

Break Lemon out of the detention cell, run to where Nami is, and then leave town?

In all honesty, it would be easy.

But there would be no point. So instead Sousuke answered.

"I guess you're right. If the 'adjustment' is necessary, then I will cooperate. However, I have a request."

"Oh?"

The Chief raised an eyebrow in amusement.

"I don't mind making friends and playing nice in the soccer stadium, but I want the opportunity to start getting serious. Somewhere I can display my skills freely, with no holding back, and where there is more money involved. That kind of place."

"....."

"It exists, doesn't it?"

In response, the Chief watched Sousuke with careful eyes.

"What are you referring to?"

"I heard a rumor."

"Where did you hear it?"

"Here and there."

Expressionless, the Chief said something in his native language, and one of the policemen nodded and left the interrogation room reluctantly. The other officer – the one who had hit Sousuke – stayed. It was more than likely he was aware of what Sousuke was talking about.

When the door closed again, a crooked smile crossed the Chief's face.

"Do you know exactly what you're talking about?"

"Of course. The Yami Battle is intended to entertain VIP guests. Live ammunition firearms are used. The reward is in a completely different league from the Arena, as well." Sousuke said, repeating exactly what an old friend of one of his war buddies had told him before, when he was still in Tokyo. In fact, Sousuke had come to this town specifically for the Yami Battle.

"Do you realize that half of the participants die within a few months?"

"Obviously."

When Sousuke answered so casually, the Chief put back on his regulation cap.

"... There are only two kinds of people who wish to appear in that place," he muttered. "A weak AS pilot trapped in debt, or a foolish, hot-shot pilot who has too much confidence for his own good. It's either one or the other. Mind telling me why you're so interested?"

"First of all, I need the money. I want to buy back a woman. She's a prostitute."

"Where?"

"Not here. In Tokyo."

Of course, the story was nonsense. It was a common story Sousuke had heard in the pubs and on TV. As for deciding that the woman was in Tokyo, it was simply to make it difficult for the Chief and the policemen to investigate his story. He was guessing that the Chief would not be very interested in a story about a woman. And the Chief himself confirmed Sousuke's suspicion.

"And the other reason?"

“I guess you could say it’s similar to you with your work. You like this kind of room, right?” Sousuke said, surveying the interrogation room around him and taking it all in – the traces of blood and teeth alongside scattered fingernails.

Traces of pain. The smell of violence.

“The competition in the Arena is a sport. Even if the irritating odor of jet fuel is there, the smell of blood and gun powder is not.”

“That’s your reason?”

“Isn’t that enough?”

The Chief threw his head back and laughed. His whole body shook with laughter. His flabby meat jiggled endlessly, and the drawn laughter leaked from his gaping violet lips.

“Looks like you’re somehow the second kind. You definitely aren’t lacking self-confidence in your skill.”

“I would like to hear your answer.”

“Interesting. Very interesting. I guess I can put in a word. However – you have no sponsor. We’ll be keeping the Frenchman and we will release him after the match, as long as you can prove you’re trustworthy. You may leave, Sagara Sousuke,” the Chief concluded and left the interrogation room.



He was hesitant to leave Lemon behind, but for the moment he had no choice. However, before leaving, Sousuke choose a suitable looking police officer and gives him \$50 with the instructions, “*Do not harm the Frenchman, and make sure he is treated politely. If you can do that, then afterwards I’ll give you another \$50.*”

After leaving the station, Sousuke only walked a few steps before he heard Nami's voice.

"Sousuke!?"

Nami rushed across the dusty road. She probably already knew about the arrest. She looked like she was waiting – just killing time – at the cheap café across the street from the police station.

"What happened!? Where's Master Lemon?"

"Still inside. They let me go after I talked to the Chief."

"The Chief..... that cold-hearted villain?"

It seemed like the Chief was well known. Reading the surprise and doubt on Nami's face, Sousuke nodded his head in confirmation.

"Why did he let you go after you talked to him? ... Ugh, something stinks."

Nami made a sour face and sniffed the air. Even though it was only one night, he had been among a bunch of unhygienic, filthy prisoners. It was no surprise that he reeked.

"Let's return to the hotel. I'll explain the situation there."

The two of them hailed a taxi and headed back to Lemon's hotel room.

After a shower, putting on some clean clothes, and drinking some mineral water, Sousuke felt refreshed. He was more than gratified after going so long without clean clothes or drinkable water.

When he returned to the living room, Nami was sitting cross-legged on the sofa watching TV anxiously. It was more than understandable that she hadn't calmed down.

"... So? What's going on?"

"We won too much. It seems like it got on our colleagues' nerves. They held Lemon under ransom, threatened you, and

suggested a fixed match. I consented.” Sousuke said, sitting down on the sofa.



“A fixed match. So that’s what this is about.”

“You’re not angry?”

“Not really. I heard rumors about this kind of thing before. Besides, anyone that expects good sportsmanship from a gambling town full of swindlers, is an idiot. I’m just glad that’s all that happened. But...”

“But?”

“The situation could get ugly. Their real intention behind arresting you and Lemon, and making us work so hard for nothing, is because they’re beginning to consider us a threat. If we don’t cooperate, they’ll just use force and get rid of us. The police Chief, did he give you any terms or conditions?”

“Some, for the time being.”

“What were they?”

“I’ll be fighting in a Yami Battle.”

“Come again?” Nami’s leg, which she had been bouncing up and down, suddenly stopped. “Yami Battle?”

“Yes.”

“You serious?”

“Yes. The profit seems good.”

“Wait a second. Do you even know what kind of competition that is? There’s been rumors floating around between the people in this trade, but nothing’s been confirmed. That it doesn’t matter how strong you are, it isn’t enough. Don’t they use live ammo? Isn’t it an actual battle?”

“Seems like it.”

“Using my AS?”

“That’s the plan, yes.”

“You’ve gotta be joking!” Nami yelled, shooting to her feet in anger. A reasonable reaction. “You think it’s as simple as using that AS in the Yami Battle and having a fair fight?! Well it’s not!

You realize, I haven't even touched the F.C. (Firearms Control) system since I first picked that Savage up!? The armor is worn-out too! The Administration demanding a fixed match, that I can understand, but competing in the Yami Battle!? That's a whole different story! This is seriously dangerous!"

"You're right."

"Then why did you agree!? If you want to die, that's your own choice. But why do you have to risk my precious AS?"

"That's..."

Sousuke trailed off and continued towel drying his hair.

Should he tell her the truth?

Or, should he just leave it at that?

This was the question he had been hesitant about answering since he left the police station. He would have to give a vague explanation.

However, if he did express his desire to participate in the Yami Battle, no matter how high the reward, Nami and the others probably wouldn't consent to it. That was only speculation, but Sousuke's intuition was usually right about this kind of thing.

"Lemon was taken hostage, so I had no choice but to agree to the terms."

After telling them that, and resolving the funds issue, it may be possible to persuade them.

Because he'd lived with her up to this point, Sousuke knew Nami was a good person. From his own point of view, he couldn't really say whether there was enough trust between them.

But suddenly he remembered.

"I don't want to die without knowing anything!"

Tokiwa Kyoko's words from that time, and the look on her face with her eyes full of tears were never far from his mind. But they hit him hard right then.

Pathetic. Only half a day ago he had felt nothing and was doing so well – had been so close to becoming that deadly weapon. But now every phenomenon, every circumstance, swayed his heart. Could he really achieve his “Strategic Objective” in such a state?

He didn’t know.

“Is it about abacus calculations?” Nami asked after waiting patiently for a while for an answer.

“.....”

“Hey. The thing is, I may never shut up about the financial situation. Even if it’s called being stingy, I feel like it can’t be helped. But, you know? You and me, are we only business partners? I mean, you can talk to me about it, right?”

“Huh?”

Sousuke didn’t understand what she meant, and looked up into Nami’s eyes. She leaned forward toward the sofa.

“...that isn’t the reason.”

“I thought that we were at least friends. Was I wrong?” she asked and leaned closer. Incidentally, the motion caused her breasts to peak out from the top of her tank top. Startled by the unintentional act, Sousuke suddenly felt conflicted and like a fool.

What is the precise weapon? What is the strategic objective?

Didn’t he know the answers only a moment ago? It turned out he was only human, an existence full of contradictions. No matter how hard he tried, that was a fact he could not escape.

That’s why he had such a hard time.

Averting his eyes away from the soft skin before him, he said, “You’re right. Then I will tell you.”

It was better to confess to this new friend than to lie to her. If they couldn’t reach an understanding between them, then he’d cross that bridge when he came to it.

“The one who suggested the Yami Battle to the Chief, was me.”

“Why!?” Nami demanded with wide eyes.

“Because that was my objective from the start. Competing in the Arena was the only means I had to get closer to the Administration’s darker side. I heard rumors from my fellow mercenary friends, about the real fighting level of the Yami Battles. It’s suspected that ‘Amalgam’ is involved with it in some way.”

“Ama...lgam?”

“It is the name of a certain organization. They are a Terrorist organization and a Military-Industrial Complex with deep connections. They instigated disputes in many places all over the world. Amalgam has masterminded many of the serious terrorist incidents which have occurred over the past several years.”

“Whoa whoa. Wait just a minute...”

“There is a highly top-secret Mercenary Corps who fought against Amalgam. They have the fortune to use equipment that is one generation advanced, they pride themselves on rivaling the special forces of regular armies. It’s a Corps that fights against brutal Terrorist and Criminal organizations. As well as intervening in regional conflict crises and resolving the situation. I’m a survivor of that Mercenary Corps.”

The story was suddenly becoming large-scale and serious, and Nami was becoming more and more confused.

“I- ... I don’t really get it. What do you mean ‘survivor’? What happened to your Mercenary Corps?”

“Amalgam wiped it out.”

“.....”

“Amalgam’s true nature is unclear. Neither who nor where. Very little is known about the extent of their influence. The few clues that I could gather pointed to Namsak and the Yami Battle. A

few times my Military unit overthrew Amalgam's ASes. From the defeated machines we were able to collect identities, specifying how many of their operation soldiers had once worked as players in Namsak."

"Oh..."

"You don't believe it?"

He looked at his companion with his face as straight and hard as possible. Nami, still looking half in doubt, stared at Sousuke and froze.

"Are you serious?"

"Affirmative."

"Well, I always kind of knew that no ordinary person could possess your caliber of skill... that aside, aren't these people you're going after dangerous?"

"Yes." Sousuke nodded, then said in a completely casual tone, "I want to get closer to Amalgam. Your cooperation is necessary to do that."

".....!"

What followed that was a reaction that was only natural.

Nami flew into a rage shouting 'You got to be shittin' me!!', up-turned the table, scattering the contents across the room, yelling "Fight alone without permission?!" Then after hurling a PET bottle at his head screamed, "I never want to see your face again!". She then stormed out of the hotel room, slamming the door behind her.

It didn't make Nami a bad person.

It was a totally understandable reaction.

As I thought, it really is impossible.

Sighing deeply, Sousuke began cleaning up the mess Nami had caused. By the looks of things Nami would probably be firing

him, and he wondered if he'd be able to find someone else with a suitable AS in time. No one reliable came to mind.

Well, what should I do? he thought as he cleaned up all the rubbish. That's when the doorbell rang – resounding through the room.

Opening the door, he looked outside to see that the visitor was Nami. Looking very displeased, she stared at Sousuke motionlessly.

“For the time being all I want to know is this,” she said with a slight pout. “Are you in trouble?”

“Yes.”

“Do you need my help?”

“Affirmative.”

Receiving the honest reply, Nami's tense shoulders relaxed and she tapped Sousuke good-naturedly on the chest with her fist.



“Okay. I guess I’ll let you stick around a while longer.”

“Is that really okay?”

“Master Lemon is in prison. Plus, the reward money is good, right?”

“Yes, definitely.”

“I don’t want you to get your hopes up though, because I don’t know if the crew will go along with it. If they say no, then it’s no.”

“Roger.”

“And don’t tell them anything about Amalgam. It’s harder to be involved in something if you know nothing about it.”

“Thank you.”



It turned out that Nami had quite a bit of charisma at her disposal.

Team Crossbow’s maintenance crew did consent to participate in the Yami battle. There were a few people who were opposed to the idea, but after Nami explained about Lemon becoming a hostage, and reassured them that Sousuke had extraordinary skills, eventually, they reluctantly gave the “OK”.

The following evening of the next day an errand boy arrived with a message from the Chief. It said:

[On Saturday at 21:00, come to the Church ruins, north of Munamera. Of course, bring the AS, too.]

Munamera was a small farming village along the highway, roughly 20 km north of Namsak.

There was no way they would hold the battle in Namsak. The live ammunition the AS’ use – 30 mm bullets – could easily reduce anything they hit to rubble. The Yami battlegrounds were

somewhere in Namsak's outskirts, in the mountain areas, where there weren't very many people.

[Don't be late. If you are, your friend in the detention cell may face various inconveniences.]

After delivering the Chief's message the errand boy exited the hangar.

"I feel sorry for Master Lemon. Not only will he develop neuroses in jail, but he'll also be violated by the gay prisoners."

Nami grumbled while quickly dismantling the white Savage's control box.

"I gave the prison guard a tip," Sousuke said, helping with the maintenance.

"It would be nice if that's all there is to it. We can remove that switchboard over there. That shouldn't be a problem."

Nami picked at a circuit connected to the F.C. system.

"Is it any good?"

"Uh-huh. At any rate, the Flbn-32 probably won't be of any use. If that's the case, you had better reduce the burden with the home-made software."

"Home-made software?"

"I rewrote it. Specifically for the Yami Battle. It took me most of the morning to finish. I'm pretty weak when it comes to stuff like that, and I mean big time"

Sousuke stopped what he's doing and stared intently at Nami's smiling face.

"Just this morning? You rewrote the software on your own?"

As far as Sousuke knew, that wasn't a job someone could finish in a few rushed hours. Even a specially trained engineer would need at least a few days – working slowly and carefully – to complete it as much as possible. It was not a process a 16 or 17

year old girl, who had not undergone any specialist training, could handle.

Actually, in the beginning, when Sousuke was in Afghanistan, most of the amateur or beginner engineering students in the guerrilla groups tampered with the Savage software like that. But the custom-made software was ineffective and they had to suffer with it until they got a hold of the software that was actually professionally made for the ASes.

“Have you studied it before?”

“No way. I just kept tinkering with it a bit.”

“Even then, it’s not something that can be done so easily. Where on earth did you get technical skills of that caliber—”

“Like—I-said!” Nami waved her hand as if she were shooing something annoying away. “I said I was weak at it, didn’t I? Well, if I touch it a little, I think I can get a general understanding of it. It’s not really that big of a deal, right?”

Impossible.

“When you first got your AS, you learned AS maintenance methods from someone, right?” Sousuke asked the question as casually as possible, waiting for the answer.

“Huh?”

Nami stopped her maintenance work and stared at Sousuke with a look full of wonder.

“You didn’t learn it from anyone?” Unease started to tickle the edge of Sousuke’s mind. “Then, why—”

“But, even if I don’t understand it, I can just fiddle with it a bit and I work it out. Somehow.”

It was hard to think. Even if it was a 2nd generation type, to understand the AS system, let alone operate the AS, proper training was necessary.

For a teenage girl who didn't have any engineering knowledge – who hadn't been taught by anyone– it shouldn't be possible.

It can't be. Her too?

No. Such a coincidence was impossible. The chances of one person being that are one in tens of thousands. Actually, the probability of their existence was less than one in a million. The chances of meeting one himself so abruptly and by accident–

“Hey buddy,” Nami said, shaking Sousuke from his thoughts. “Don't space out on me. Quickly, unfasten that plug over there.”

“Right.”

Sousuke returned to doing maintenance work on the Savage, with a heavy heart.

Right now I'm busy.

I'll worry about it when this mission is completed. If time allows, I'll look into it with more detail, Sousuke thought carelessly.



That Saturday evening–

After they loaded the Savage onto the huge tractor-trailer, Sousuke and the rest of the team drove out of Namsak and headed to Munamera Village. The narrow roads they had to take were in ill repair from the long years of war; making it nearly impossible for any on-coming traffic to get passed the bulky AS trailer.

The scenery on either side of the road seemed to go on forever. On one side there were rice fields as far as the eye could see, and on the other was endless line of mountains covered with

leafy trees. But they could barely see the scenery, or much of anything really, on account of the dust obscuring their vision. It was the dry season, so all the dust the trailer was kicking up wasn't settling at all; it just stayed floating in the air, making it very hard to see.

When they finally arrived at the church ruins, there were already some policemen – from the Namsak police department – waiting for them. Sousuke and the rest of the team weren't late. They'd actually arrived before the promised time, but by the way the officers were acting one would think that they were late.

“Wait here and don't move!” stated an officer gruffly, pointing his gun at Sousuke.

So they waited.

30 minutes later, the Chief arrived by helicopter. The roaring turbo shaft engine resounded loudly as the helicopter landed in an open area in front of the church ruins.

The Chief stepped down from the helicopter and when his eyes rested upon Sousuke's stern face a lewd smile blossomed across his pudgy mug.

“Sagara Sousuke! You'll board the AS here,” he ordered. “Go 2 km northeast to more ruins. That is the ‘Arena’. The rest of you will be obedient and wait here.”

“What?! The radio signal won't reach if we're that far away from the location! What the hell kind of—”

An Officer turned and aimed his carbine rifle directly at Nami, cutting off her protest.

“— on second thought, it's a wonderful idea. Aha ha ha ha...” she finished lamely.

“That's enough young lady,” the Chief said and walked over to a nearby pick-up truck that had arrived around the same time as the helicopter.

“Will you be observing the match?” Sousuke asked the Chief’s retreating form.

“I will be. But you don’t need to know from where.”

“Fine. Just be careful of any stray bullets.”

The Chief paused as he went to climb into the truck, and snorted.

“Your concern is touching. However it’s unnecessary. We would never expose our important clients to something so dangerous.”

“Then I can fight without reserve.”

Without another word Sousuke boarded the white Savage, and the Chief climbed into the truck.



When Sousuke boarded the AS the first thing he did was go through a primary system check. Boot the support power unit up. Check. Headgear connection stable. Check. And so on and so forth. After he finished the pre-battle system check, Sousuke turned on the main power unit – a 1200 horse power diesel engine.

The engine roared to life – the groaning voice of raw power.

Sousuke turned off the safety on the control system and, in one smooth motion, the Savage stood up.

The oil pressure was normal and the muscle packages were in mint condition too. It had taken three days of intense preparation to get the AS into the condition it needed to be in for this battle. The white Savage “Crossbow” had never looked so good.

“I’m going,” Sousuke stated after he switched on the external speaker. His eyes stayed glued to Nami’s worried face displayed on the screen. The grainy, rough video feed showed Nami turn and yell in the direction of the external microphone.

“Be careful.”

“Affirmative, do not worry.”

“I’m not worried about you! I’m worried about my AS!”

“Oh.”

“Still-”, Nami hesitated and glanced down at her feet – her body language screamed uncertainty – and she looked back up at the camera. “Maybe it’s pointless even saying this – maybe kind of unreasonable too – but you’d better come back in one piece.”

“That is my intention.”

Something urgent flashed across Nami’s eyes, but the optical sensor blurred her facial expression too much to pick it up. However, the look was gone in an instant, and Nami gave a hesitant smile instead.

“All right. You are so treating us when this is over.”

Sousuke couldn’t help but find that smile alluring. He was so tempted to just abandon his quest that very moment and return to Namsak with her. The idea had such a strong appeal. In fact, he was suddenly seized by the strong impulse to climb down from his AS and take her into his arms and just hold her tight.

Why was it, regardless of his intentions, this doubt kept surfacing in his mind again and again?

Is it too late to turn back? To stop taking such dangerous risks altogether? To live freely and happily and easily with Nami, and to enjoy each day in Namsak with her... Is it so wrong to want to live that way?

“What’s wrong?”

“... nothing.”

He was being foolish.

Why is this happening now? What should I do? As these troubling thoughts bubbled to the surface, Sousuke suddenly remembered the reason why he was there in the first place, and an

unspeakable guilt settled into his conscience. He remembered the hardship he had went through with the person who had first made him feel – and then had made him care.

The human heart is a very strange thing, he thought, and shook off the lingering sting of regret and guilt.

“I will do what it takes.” Sousuke said firmly, and began to run.

After about 100 meters he looked back. Nami and the others were still watching him go. Sousuke gave them a casual waive and ran toward the appointed area.

The terrain of the Arena was intense by no small means.

Every step the savage took rattled the AS’ frame and disturbed the dried mud, kicking dust into the air. Bushes and trees had to be pushed aside in order for Sousuke to go due northwest.

Sousuke checked each individual system as he piloted the white Savage.

The systems he hadn’t used in this unit yet took priority in his analysis. He checked out the optical sensors again and the newly installed Firearm Control System. Even though he didn’t have any firearms yet. In this situation, compared to the equipment he had during his time with Mithril, this AS seemed pretty pathetic–

But this was how they all started out in the beginning.

The situation wasn’t too bad though. It wasn’t the first time Sousuke had embarked into such a scenario, but at those times his AS and equipment were in a far worse state than what he currently had. So he wasn’t going to complain.

Sousuke glanced at the digital map out of the corner of his eye; it indicated that he had arrived at his destination.

He could see the ruins of an old temple.

Vines as thick as people were twisted and weaved over, through, and among the collapsed parts of the temple. It was so intertwined with the remains that – if Sousuke didn't know any better – he'd think that nature itself had brought the temple to ruin. Sousuke glanced off to the side and, placed beside a statue of a god that was destroyed in a recent battle, he spotted a 37 mm AS rifle.

A BK-540.

A standard firearm for ASes, which kind of resembled an AK assault rifle that humans used. Beside the rifle were two prepared rifle magazines and two HEAT hammers for close proximity combat.

“Welcome Crossbow, to the Real Arena.”

A voice came over the radio. It was the Chief.

“Those there are your weapons. Use them well.”

Using the communication equipment, Sousuke tried to locate the dispatch source of the radio wave the Chief was using. He tried the old style infrared sensor too. After all, he had no idea where the Chief and his goons were. Unfortunately the super broadband sonar that would have made the search conveniently easy was a luxury only available to him in Mithril issued ASes.

Searching the area – before or during the match – for the location of the Chief and his VIP guest was improbable. He would have to wait until afterwards. First, he had to defeat his opponent.

Sousuke brought the Savage down to one knee and picked up the weapons and magazines.

“Thanks for the welcome,” he muttered, and calmly attached the newly acquired equipment to the AS' hip and back.

“Where is my opponent?”

“He's right in front of you. The pilot is laughing at you.”

“...?”

Besides the movement of some small animals, Sousuke couldn't sense anything in the ruins except for himself and his Savage.

The Savage was kneeling on the ancient paved ground and there was nothing in front of him.

According to the optical and infrared sensors nothing was there.

Wait—

He probably wouldn't have even noticed if he was inside an AS cockpit with a complete direct venting system. But the old Savage was different. The distorted armor left gaps and holes where outside air snuck in.

He realized what was there only because the ion smell that tickled his nose was so *familiar*. It was so familiar it was nostalgic.

The atmosphere shimmered.

“!!”

With astounding speed, Sousuke moved the Savage and jumped back.

The scream of metal.

From out of thin air, a huge sharp blade swung in an arch at incredible speed and just grazed the Savage's armor chest plate.

That was—

A monomolecular cutter.

As he pivoted out of the way, Sousuke readied his rifle and aimed at the space where the enemy had briefly appeared.

There was nothing there, but suddenly a gust of wind kicked up dirt, and something jumped high into the sky. Thanks to his experience and technical skill, Sousuke was able to track its movement with his eyes. Even though it should have, the jumping power of the enemy didn't surprise Sousuke.

It landed on the remains of the temple, which was on the verge of collapsing. It looked like it used to be the foundation for the main hall of the Buddhist temple.

Second generation ASes like the Savage and the Bushnell couldn't do something like that. It didn't matter what level of skill the pilot had. They could not fly or jump like that.

Then, what was the enemy that landed on that temple? What on earth could make such a surprise attack and still not be seen? Sousuke knew what.

"You know what it is, don't you?" the Chief asked over the radio.

On top of the temple – that house of Gods that had been deteriorating over a hundred years – the air shimmered with a dancing phosphorescence. A veil of pale blue light rippled and parted like a curtain, and an AS appeared on the other side.

A slim gray figure stood silhouetted in the moonlight.

A head strongly resembling the helmet a fighter plane pilot would wear.

The graceful unhurried movement flowed and hid power that reminded one of a leopard or a bird of prey.

Even though he knew what it felt like to pilot one, and had been through so many terrible battles with one, it felt like he was seeing some other-worldly being. It was like Sousuke was seeing it for the very first time.

"M9...?"

It had been more than obvious to Sousuke – before he even decided to battle in this match – that the opponent he would face would be relentless... but this? This was completely merciless.

The enemy was an M9. A M9 Gernsback, the next generation model of Arm Slave.

It was the latest model and Sousuke had used one time and time again when he had been with Mithril. Sousuke knew better than anyone the important, extraordinary specifications, and the advanced equipment used by that machine.

And he was confronting it with an old-fashioned Savage. Don't get him wrong, Nami had done everything she could to prepare this Savage and she did a good job. But the truth was, this unit was inferior to the M9 in every aspect of performance.

Like power, for example.

The engine output type of this Savage was 880 Kw – about 1200 horsepower. Making it – power wise – equal to a tank or ten modern cars.

It was considerable power, but nothing compared to the M9 he was facing off against which had an output of 2500 horsepower. The M9's engine – a cold nuclear fusion generator made by Ross & Hambleton Inc – was called the "APR-2500" and had a kilowatt conversion of roughly 3300 kw. It was so extraordinary, powerful and expensive, that the M9 was on a level far beyond that of any land combat weapon, and closer to that of a fighter jet.

In other words, the M9's smart and delicate appearance was misleading. It didn't belay the fact that it was far superior to any tank or armored car.

To top it off it only weighed 7-8% of the Savage's weight. Needless to say, when Sousuke compared its weight vs. its power, the motility was more than a little concerning. After all, the M9 was the result of several generations of scientists and electricians carrying shared knowledge of the AS in their minds and advancing it. Sousuke and his colleagues never would have defeated the countless number of Savages during Mithril missions if it wasn't for their AS' superior control. At first, the M9's performance was overwhelmingly different. It would defeat opponents so

effortlessly. It was necessary to use the M9 for the delicate missions like “Isolated hostage recovery.” If it wasn’t for the highly efficient M9s Mithril had, the SRT never could have pulled off the impossible military tactics they had, and returned successful.

And right now, this was just a simple one-on-one fight.

The odds weren’t looking too good. The surrounding area most likely wouldn’t hinder the M9 at all. Plus, ammo didn’t need to be preserved; there was no need to be concerned about stray shots, and there was no time limit.

But –

Is this the answer? Was I right?

A feeling similar to relief washed over Sousuke.

What were the chances that he’d happen to encounter one of the most state-of-the-art machines in the world in a place like this? No matter how Sousuke looked at it, it was now certain that there was an organization with limitless financial power looming in the shadows behind the Chief. When he first drifted into Namsak, Sousuke hadn’t been completely confident in his lead and had wondered if participating in the showy arena matches was even worth it. So this was an unexpected but welcome result.

Right, this was no coincidence.

Sousuke knew who the enemy was, who was hiding behind the Chief – pulling the strings like a puppet master. The only people who knew about him and Mithril’s crushing defeat were elite members of Amalgam.

Sousuke had been anticipating some kind of retaliation when he had so boldly refused to use an alias. The danger in doing so was big but the effect was obvious and expected – and the enemy had answered his silent challenge with this M9. But Sousuke suspected that their real motive behind letting him fight

the M9 was probably to gauge his reaction and get a feel for his background.

Or was it some kind of game?

“Surprised?” The Chief asked over the radio, “From what I’ve heard, you know how to pilot that machine. From the time you were with Mithril.”

“So you know,” Sousuke muttered, without showing the slightest sign of unrest.

“Playing such a flashy role in the Arena, what did you expect? You didn’t even use an alias. You always dominated the competition in town, but that got boring after a while. So I’m giving you this precious opportunity to battle this M9... well, I don’t really expect you to come out on top. But it’s the thought that counts, right?”

Sousuke’s mind was busy pondering the origins of this M9 when the Chief’s voice saying, “...in town” it got him considering something else. In town.

The Chief hadn’t said or hinted at anything when Sousuke had been held at the police station. Had the Chief already known about Sousuke’s past when they were in the interrogation room? No, he’d found out about Sousuke and Mithril afterwards.

Then, in Amalgam, the man’s a small fry.

That much was obvious. But then, how did he know who Sousuke was? Someone who knew about “Sousuke Sagara’s” past would have to have connections to a high-class intelligence network. So did that mean the chief was important enough to get access to that information after all?

Sousuke didn’t know, but he decided to test it, “Tonight’s guests will be entertained.”

“That’s right. By all means, fight to your heart’s content.” On the other side of the radio, beneath the crackling noise, the

Chief laughed. “But... if you obediently tell me whom you’re working for, I can tell your opponent to go easy on you.”

“Unfortunately, I’m working alone.”

“Then it’s ok for you to die.”

The connection was cut, and everything fell silent.

The M9 on the monitor moved, and the battle began.



<Incoming>

Like a hungry hunting dog, ordered by its master to “go at it” the M9 swung with its monomolecular cutter spinning in its hand after pulling it from the scabbard on its hip.

It played like a drama, but the 3rd generation AS was not so easy to anticipate. The enemy continued to move with the rifle at the hard point of its back, aiming the muzzle towards Sousuke.

Sousuke’s Savage, with rifle in hand, headed towards the enemy unit. He shook the unit towards the left side. There was no surviving path aside from the left. He knew it very well.

Both of them moved and fired.

The two blazing and thundering roars tore the stillness of the ruins at night.

The M9 leapt in the night sky, easily evading Sousuke’s shot.

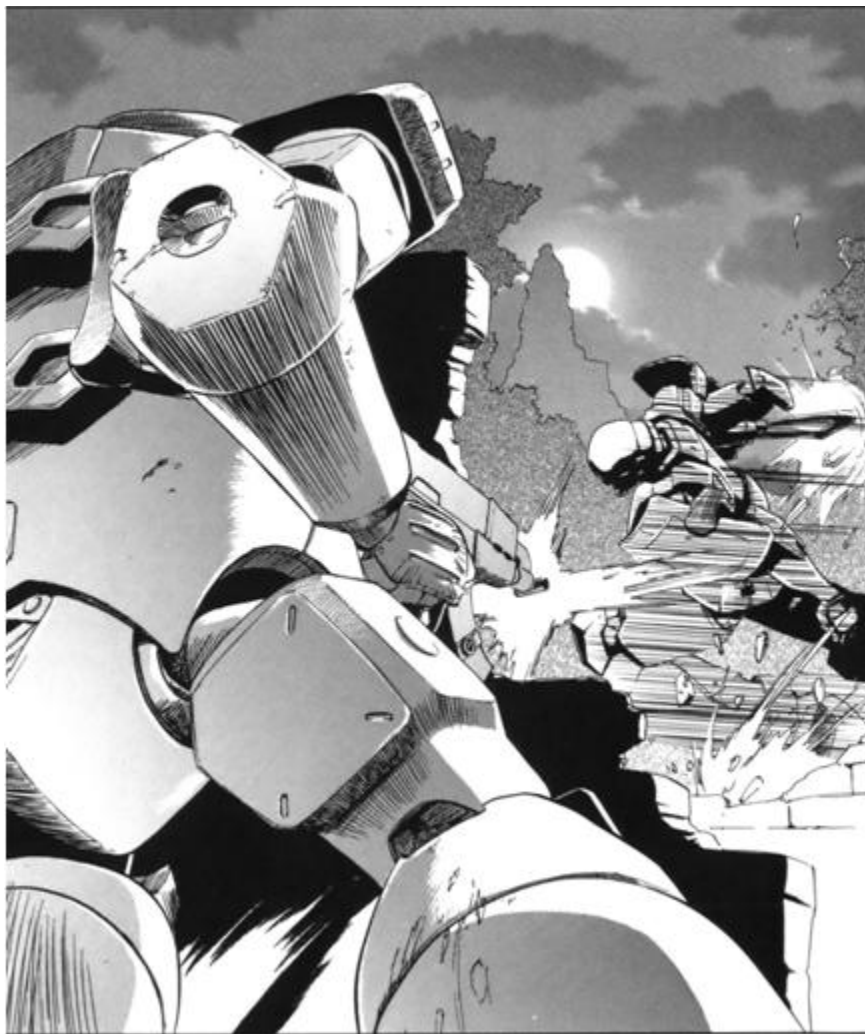
-No, in terms of accuracy, they used evasive actions just before Sousuke’s rifle discharged. Even if it was the M9, it couldn’t move faster than a bullet. Of course this was true of the Savage too. Even making evasive actions first the movement of the old unit, in proportion to the M9, was heavy and dull.

A shell grazed the right shoulder armor.

“.....!!”

That was dangerous. If he had been a few milliseconds slower, it would have hit the cockpit situated in the chest. One way or another in order to surpass the first bullet of the enemy, the Savage first had to make a leaping action. Then the movement of the unit fell to the left.

The AS wiggled vertically, different from an ordinary vehicle, and had already placed itself in a standing position.



Jumping recklessly, entrusting the unit to gravity, the Savage was more agile than the original specs.

And then it maneuvered to the left side.

Looking from the enemy's standpoint, Sousuke would be moving to the right. The M9, with the rifle maintained in its right hand, had both hands in firing position. In order to set the Savage in its sight, both arms needed to move in order to see the right side of its body from the unit.

When an AS moves its extremities from the centerline of its body to the exterior there is a weak point. The movement can be compared to the centerline of the human body. (Usually it's not much of a problem, as it's a small weak point on a strong system).

This was one way the AS' model followed the human body.

Even though ASes are superb machines, they are not designed like the revolving turrets controlled by tanks. Their construction makes motions outside of the body slightly slower and more inaccurate. Especially when holding a heavy rifle. The "extreme weight" is greater, that is the most striking difference.

A human holding a 3kg barbell or a plastic bottle filled with water, waving their arms sharply left and right would not be able to stop suddenly. This was the same for an AS.

Even if it was the newest M9, since it had the left and right arms of a "human", the fundamentals of engineering and construction could not run away from this problem. In other words, following the chosen movement of Sousuke's Savage was an unpleasant movement for the M9. After all, he'd been piloting it harshly. In pestering the enemy pilot, Sousuke was thoroughly knowledgeable.

And then after the landing, what would happen would happen.

He was running in front with a low profile. Thinking of the terrain and obstacles, and then the positional relation, he moved to take up a good firing position.

He was also looking out for being fired at.

Even if the M9 was more bulletproof than the Savage, it would not be difficult damage it with its own rifle. If it took a 37mm shell, in the end even for an M9, at the very least its basic functions would deteriorate. Similar to an armored vehicle, the thickness of the M9's armor varied---the rear armor was weaker than the front armor.

That was why the enemy kept on moving to cover his back. Then...

Sousuke, controlling his limbs skillfully, made a clean turn, plunging the unit from the walls of the ruins on the left side. Lowering his position like that, he ran around the obstacles.

To the enemy this was an annoying unit.

Continuing like that, it was obvious to aim for the Savage, with a solid left turn he obliquely exposed the rear armor.

Splashing the dry mud, the M9 landed on the ground, suspended in the direction it had initially run. It changed its posture to a light step, trying to judge the next moment it moved---

Letting the unit loose, Sousuke positioned the gun barrel from the crevice of the crumbling ruins, firing three shots. He used the Master Arm of the cockpit for manual firing. The Firing Control system of this unit was nothing to be counted on.

He missed.

The three discharges from the 37mm shells, 2 meters from the left and rear of the enemy M9, hit the wall of the ruins. Splinters from the projectiles scattering and dust flew around and firing sounds echoed from the surrounding mountains.

Aiming is tough after all.

He smacked his lips. If the hit had been successful he would have been satisfied, that was the level of his shooting. He continued to pressure his opponent, inviting the enemy pilot to present an opportunity.

“I”

The M9 returned fire. It maneuvered in the intervals of the succession of shots to take a better position.

Impact.

The Savage hid inside the stone wall. Countless crushed stones smashed in the surroundings, striking violently on the armor of the Savage.

An alarm sounded.

A number of warning devices flickered.

Firstly, the cooling unit was not functioning. The power of the left arm and transmission system had an indication of “oil pressure declining”. There was no fire in the power system. Somehow, he knew that it was not a fatal injury.

Letting go of the stick, he manually performed the Damage Control from the switch panel. Engine Management. Controlling hydraulics. He picked up the smell of diesel. There was no fire. There was no failure in the gauge.

His fingers acted mostly on reflex, moving automatically to strike the switches. If he had been in an M9 the AI would have worked it out in an instant. Ingrained in the long experience of piloting, he was accurate and quick in operation.

Sousuke, carrying the damage control with one hand, fired a feint to take evasive actions, getting away from the successive attacks of the enemy. This action could not be imitated by ordinary soldiers. If it were new recruits, they would stop and take out the user’s manual, trying this or that to regulate the system.

How do you move without hindrance?

It was indicated in the display that the unit's control system of the left arm's power would be inefficient in 120 seconds, but this calculation couldn't be trusted. Sousuke knew it well. Since technical experts had no knowledge of actual combat, that was as good as a random number.

With his own experience and the unit's current status, taking into consideration the tactics that were chosen, Sousuke was roughly calculating.

The longest was 15 minutes. The shortest was 8 minutes.

Until then, do not ask the impossible.

But until then, would he be able to take advantage of the opportunity the M9 put out....?



"It's started" Nami, waiting in the outskirts of Munamera village, murmured. They were far from the battlefield, but she knew her Savage and Sousuke had entered into a battle. The roaring gunfire and flames illuminated the mountains.

The girl, and her maintenance crew surrounding her, was still standing with the policemen, carbine guns at hand.

There were 5 of them. Even if the police did a handstand, her group still couldn't disobey them.

Everyone in the maintenance crew was murmuring.

"It started, that means...we don't know about that"

"Let's get closer and look"

"Idiot! You wanna get hit with stray bullets!?"

Even with the current situation, they were still carefree. Only the maintenance crew's leader, Ash, was grumbling with a worried face.

“-there’s a bad premonition- that’s why I am against it-this mood is bad. No matter how much the guarantee was-”

“Ash, don’t complain” Nami said with an irritated voice.

“Well, but, I have a bad feeling, really-”

The sullen “policeman” with a rifle patrolled by, they started whispering.

“You know about Sousuke’s skills right? He’ll come back like nothing happened”

“Ah. No. that’s not what I’m talking about”

One of the policeman, who had the insignia of a sergeant pulled out a wireless radio, and started to exchange short messages.

“Yes Chief.”

“What about the girl?”

“Roger.”

“We’re dealing with her.”

The sergeant, after speaking the words, stared at Nami and Ash, who were continuing with bitter faces.

“It’s like this. This feeling....”

“It’s movement.”

The police sergeant cut off the wireless radio and walked over to interrupt them.

“Woman. You come with me. The other one get in that van.”

“Eh? why....”

“Hurry!”

“Wa..wait!”

Rudely grabbing her arm, Nami was tugged into the nearby patrol car. Ash and the maintenance members were pushed by gunpoint to get in the black van.

“Nami-”

“Don’t worry! I’ll contact you later-”

“Don’t be slow”

She was alone with the police sergeant. The Patrol car that Nami got in went away from there, leaving a cloud of smoke.

The van that Ash and the others got into was going on the opposite direction of Nami's patrol car.



The Chief and the others that watched the “game” on the “grandstand”, the name of the ruins-turned-battlefield 2 kilometers away in the mountain range.

The building they were in had a construct that was similar to a pill-box enclosed in a semi-basement. The wall of the front face consisted of a few meters of concrete and armor. Even in the small window for watching the sports game massively towering bulletproof glass was inlaid. If, by any chance, a stray bullet flew to this place, it gave the VIPs a sense of safety.

Differing from a real pill-box, compared to the rugged exterior wall the interior wall was extravagant.

The floor was carpeted. The ceiling was composed of good illuminating materials. There were gladiators from roman times drawn on the wall with picture realism. The sofa was also kind of high class; it looked like a first class lounge.

On the many establishments there was a large LCD. On it were many projected angles of the battle between the Savage and M9.

“Geez-”

The man spying on the battle through the small window with binoculars shrugged his shoulders.

“-I thought of it as a narrow business. And then this auspiciously appears”

“Mister Kurama, do you know the existence of the individual?” the Chief asked comfortably, sitting on the sofa.

“That’s not it. Actually we’ve met nonchalantly only a few months ago.” The man called Kurama murmured apathetically.

He was large built and generous, with short trimmed hair, and small circular sunglass. Even in front of live ammunition it was like they had the appearance of watching a boring soccer match.

“A few minutes. I thought that would be plenty of time. I think the boy soldier will fall.”

“That kid is from Mithril, and also one of their elite team, in addition he has fought with Gauron a number of times.”

“Gauron? Who is that?”

“You don’t know?”

“No. I don’t know.”

The Chief mumbled and smile innocently.

Kurama muttered a little Japanese, “*The country side is carefree huh-*”

“Huh?”

“No. Never mind.”

Kurama returned to watching the grandstand, observing the battle between the M9 and Savage.

From their position they could clearly see the two units. Sagara Sousuke’s white Savage made use of the terrain and obstacles, and looked like he was somehow evading the fierce attacks of the M9 with efficiency in the distance.

If you looked at proximity, it looked like he just kept running away, immediately having the fate of being the prey but-

“He’s good” Kurama sighed with cynicism. “With the kind of skill he has in the white unit, his opponent might not manage”

“Haha. Even if it’s white, a Savage is a Savage”

“It’s not that it’s white. But that M9. Does he know that the operator is Sagara?”

“No. I didn’t let him know.”

“He might be killed.”

After Kurama said that, the Chief’s nose snorted with a *pooh*.

“Impossible. It’s not possible. With an old model Savage? Even if he had known about it, he won’t take it easy on Sagara.”

“That’s right...”

Oh well.

Anyway that M9 also came from the spoils of war. They couldn’t expose the fact that they had it to the world. Those who saw it were dealt with. If by chance it was damaged, the data collection for the project had been accumulated.

Also, the Chief’s confidence was understandable. No matter how much he tried, there was no reason the Savage could win over the M9. The results would come anyway.

How unfortunate, Sagara Sousuke. You came all the way here. Well, it was a nice sensation.

Then the telephone inside rang. The Chief had a short conversation in the local language, and immediately hung up.

“What’s the matter?”

“It’s the dealing with that Savage’s team.”

The Chief plastered on a warped smile.

“You’re going to deal with them accurately?”

“Yes. The maintenance members are headed to the neighborhood of the pig farm. And that female owner is... we’ll be playing with her for a while. Ufufufu”

“Either way it’s a hobby you can be proud of.”

“How unfortunate. Generally speaking of the guys dealing, it’s good to boast about taking the owner. If it interests you, I’ll tell you a tale of bravery.”

“No, I’ll pass”

“As you wish. First the ankle-”

“I said stop.”

The Chief said nothing after that.

This sadistic pervert. Aren’t you the appropriate one to go to the pig farm?

He looked away from the Chief’s fat belly.

Kurama took out a carrot stick from a cigarette case. He put it in his mouth, frustrated by the yearning of Tobacco.



They thought they were being sent back to Namsak, but Ash and the maintenance crew were being brought to a farm in the outskirts of Munamera village. In less than 2 minutes, the car reached the neighborhood.

No.

Getting out of the van, they understood. This was the pig farm. Being brought to a place like this, exactly what did they plan to do?

“Hey cop. This-”

“Walk. Towards there.”

He was poked again by the carbine gun. Unable to resist, Ash and the others were taken into the storehouse.

Their noses filled with the smell of something fishy.

Solid feed formed a pile in the crude small cabin. In the middle of the feed pile was a big grinding machine. Solid feed

entered from above, and at the bottom, powdered feed was being spit out, transported via conveyer belt to the adjacent pigsty.

“Wha-”

As expect of Ash and the others, they were able to guess the policemen’s intentions.

Killing them, and using that grinder to clean up the mess.

“Form a line over there.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding!?”

“I said form a line.”

“Stop it! Hey, hey, no matter how much-”

The man hit Ash with the butt of the gun in the temple.

“Uh...!”

“Don’t make us work. Even I don’t want to be in this stinking place; I want to get out of here.”

“You’re serious!?”

“Help!”

Ash was dragged on his knees, the maintenance members were begging for their lives.

But the policeman, with cold hearted eyes, looks down on them with a faint smile.

“It’s a pity. Well, it’s just your bad luck. I’ll let you at least pray. Well, give up and form a line”

With that, the men were being put into the yard.

“There is no need for that”

A thin and tall white man with a little pretty Y-shirt and slacks walked in. He was a guy in glasses who looked intellectual but weak.

“...Master Lemon?”

It was Michael Lemon, the journalist who was supposed to be arrested in the detention cell.

He had changed from his usual cowardly way, Lemon was completely calm. This was the first time they had seen Lemon with a composed atmosphere.

“Wh...why are you here? You were supposed to be in jail-”

“It’s alright. I freed myself.” Lemon murmured with a smile. The flabbergasted policemen turned and aimed their carbine guns at him.

“I don’t know what happened but, don’t be an idiot. Why don’t you become feed for the pigs as well?”

“I’m sorry.”

Lemon did not budge at all, with one single word, muttered “Kill”

In the next moment-

The leader of the policeman was hit in the head with a rifle bullet. Scattering his brain and blood, the policeman died instantly.

“.....!”

At the same time coming from the window, men in black uniforms flew in the feed slop. Their sub-machine gun were attached to sub-lasers. Without giving the policemen time to react, they fired quickly.

Barely three seconds had passed.

Ash and the others timidly opened their eyes and looked around. Not one policeman remained without a shot in the head.

“Eh...”

The men in uniform, moving cautiously aimed their guns.

“Hii....he..help”

“Don’t worry. Don’t worry”

Ash reflexively cowered. Lemon walked over and tapped his shoulders. Even with the completely armed men surrounding him, he relaxed the tension immediately. He seemed to have cursed, but none of them were fluent in French.

“That was dangerous, Monsieur” one of the men in a mask said.

Ash blankly said, “Master Lemon, exactly what is going on?”

“Apparently, this is.”

Lemon, with a sigh, helped Ash up.

“Saying I was a journalist was a lie. Not knowing anything about ASes, that’s absolutely true. These guys are my comrades. Though I can’t say the details.”



He walked over the mouth of the feeding slope. Towering in the distant mountains, intermittent flashes of gunfire in the direction of the “Arena” could be seen.

Lemon muttered, “Sousuke seems to be close to his goal. Probably the same as ours.”



The sound of an explosion. Gunfire. The roar of an engine. A flare cut the darkness, the head of the Savage flew off. The Shadow of the M9 danced in midair, drawing near at full speed.

“....”

Sousuke made the unit strike back, aiming the rifle at the enemy. But-

I won't make it.

He decided in an instant. He leaned forward at full power to evade. The M9 had excellent aim while in mid air.

He couldn't win fair and square.

Fire rained overhead. With skillful steps the unit moved to the front, to the rear, to the left, to the right, evading the enemy's bullets with difficulty. He moved the Savage to its mobility limit.

The M9 jumped overhead of the Savage, landing on the pavement.

Without a moment's delay Sousuke fired.

The M9, with its light body bent to avoid the shot, triggered various parts of the armor to activate the ECS. A faint bluish light surged, and suddenly the form disappeared into the dark night.

Will it finally end?

Sousuke smacked his lips. This Savage was not equipped with an ECCS- an anti ECS sensor. There was a 1st generation

optical infrared sensor and meager radar. That radar was showing its age and wouldn't budge. In other words, there was no way to detect a transparent enemy.

He would be killed here.

Sousuke made the unit jump back, taking refuge by backing up inside the towering shrine. If he didn't get away, he would be caught in the fire of the M9...

A flash. An Impact.

The chest armor was shot. It seems that the angle was shallow. The chest armor was a sturdy mold, one way or another it rejected the enemy shell. The damage was slight. But the shock was transmitted to the cockpit, making Sousuke's head dizzy.

That was why he couldn't stop. He stepped backwards like that, getting inside the temple in order to guard his back.

To enshrine the 10 odd meter height of the giant God Statue, the height of the relic's ceiling was enough for an AS to get inside. Between many towering pillars the moonlight shone from a hole in the ceiling.

Sousuke made his unit go into the deepest part of the temple, changing the magazine of the rifle. This was the last magazine. His other weapons were the two sets of HEAT hammers equipped on his back. The first damage he took had made the hydraulics in the left arm decline to a dangerous level. Will it hold for one more minute? That's how it was.

...Will I gamble?

Sousuke decided immediately. There couldn't be even one second of hesitation.

Aiming at the left side entrance of the temple, he fired the rifle.

Five shots, six shots. The pillar was smashed up. Furthermore, a number of stone pillars were shot and destroyed in

the same manner. Taking care to pay attention to the reduction of the bullet count- he stopped with one shot remaining.

Inside the large place of worship, flat dust clouds floated about. Even if the enemy used its ECS, he would be able to grasp its position.

Only silence.

Immediately, the M9 rushed into the temple. He moved directly in front with the speed of an arrow. The ECS was cancelled. The pilot had judged that it would not be effective because of the dust. He was a good pilot whole heartedly.

Sousuke fired the last shot. The M9 shook to evade, with its own rifle aiming at the Savage.

“.....!”

He missed, as expected. Faster than the enemy, Sousuke pulled out the HEAT Hammer.

HEAT Hammer. As the name denotes, it has an explosive press that is used against a strong tank. It's a hammer type of melee weapon. It's disposable as it is only useable once. It explodes when hitting the enemy, and that energy goes through the armor, destroying the interior.

Sousuke used that HEAT Hammer. Instead of him, the enemy hit the stone pillars immediately.

Explosion.

The stone pillars collapse instantly. It had destroyed multiple pillars, disrupting the balance that supported the ceilings of the temple. With one hit of the HEAT Hammer the limit of the temple was reached.

There was a thundering roar. The ceiling, falling with the walls, poured a hundred tons of rock down.

The two units in the place of worship had no place to run to. They were being crushed by the collapsing ceiling and walls.

They were crushed with no interruption. The appearance of the enemy unit in the monitor, and the dust and rubble disappeared with a twinkling of the eye. The unit shook violently, all the warning device and display were flickering. The machinery positioning device shook bit by bit, informing Sousuke of his unit's upright position, and its fall to flat on its face. Aside from that, the person who lied buried in the collapsed temple was unknown.

The cave-in ended. The Echoing roar vanished, the stillness of the night returned. With difficulty the movement of the diesel engine continued to churn. Only the creaking sound of the heavy frame and armor remained.

“.....”

The unit was buried alive. The field of vision in the monitor was totally black. The freedom of the cool air couldn't be heard. The engine and hydraulic system's temperature was rising very fast. There was no time to be slow. Sousuke manually operated all the torque controls for the joints: lowering the reaction speed and in return increasing the maximum strength. It was similar to changing gears in an automobile.

Shifting the limbs, he slowly raised his position.

Even while being pressed with mountains of rubble weighing tons, Sousuke's Savage managed to crawl out into the night sky. A crack here and there in the armor and broken construction materials were scattered all over. The screen was covered by a cloud of dust.

Where's the enemy?

A rough cleaning apparatus washed off the dust clinging to the Optical sensor. Sousuke was searching for the enemy unit. The M9 couldn't be seen. It must still have been struggling under the

rubble. There was no doubt he would eventually crawl out, receiving suitable damage along the way.

Just as planned.

The completely electronic M9 was not like the Savage which was powered by hydraulics. Just like humans, contracting the muscles enabled it to move the joints. Because it had no hydraulics system, the M9 had lightweight and high mobility operation, but on the other hand it had a weak side in that it couldn't operate outside its standard load. To be able to move while having a tremendous weight being pushed down on it- that kind of situation was very rare- and so the Savage, who used the hydraulic drive, had an advantage against the M9. No matter how high the engine output, the problem was the structure of the drive system of that output.

In addition, there was a difference in the construction of the fuselage.

Compared to the M9 that had a complicated joint construction, the Savage was straightforwardly simple. The Savage's body had a strong stress point like that on oval egg, while the M9 had a flexible abdomen capable of bending in all directions. With regards to enduring bullets, the M9 had the advantage in the difference of armor materials but, in terms of the solid construction of the unit's entire frame, the old Savage model had a winning point against the M9.

Sousuke had gambled on the toughness of the Savage's characteristics.

It was by no means a tough model. But somehow, while broken and thoroughly overdoing it, it would still operate. That was the RK-91/92 series Savage's strongest point. Through the hot and humid, sand and dust, crude fuel and oil, a haphazard load, and many small damages, it kept going. Withstanding this and that

on the battlefield, it was a tool of a pro that silently continued to battle- that was the true value of this best seller unit.

To Sousuke, who had pieced together this unit from the AS control manual, it was not unreasonable for him to initially hate Mithril's Arbalest. Being delighted with the incorporation of advance functions in the "test type" was like a new recruit pretending to be a hero.

Sousuke checked his unit's condition.

The hydraulic system in the left part of his body was declining. No matter how much he stood the engine temperature wouldn't go down. The pitch of the balancer was also strange. There was a strange noise erupting from the hip joint to the frame.

But Sousuke uttered his satisfaction.

"It's a good unit."

Finally the M9 stirred from the rubble, crawling in front of his eyes.

It appeared to respond suitably.



Sousuke controlled the Savage, casually seizing the M9's head. He took out his last HEAT Hammer, and mercilessly struck the generator on the M9's abdomen.



He had accurately destroyed the power section, making sure that the M9 would not be able to function, Kurama sounded a small sigh.

“hmp...”

He was unsatisfied, but gave his approval.

Indeed, an impressive guy, to be able to win in that junk.

He had encountered many different AS pilots, and had never before seen someone win with that kind of unit going up against such an overwhelmingly advantageous enemy.

With that calmness. Highly calculating.

Sagara Sousuke's piloting skills and actual battle experience was not merely the level of a half hearted regular army man. Amalgam had need of such outstanding men---

Well, inviting him is useless.

After what happened in Shun On he didn't think that he could make his opponent, who had made it this far, obediently follow orders. Even if he used the girl that Mr. Silver had as bait, the arrangement would have had no loyalty. As soon as the girl was secured Sagara Sousuke would mobilize as they had seen in the previous battle. He would definitely go against Amalgam.

As a result, he had to be killed.

Kurama glanced by accident at the Chief's face. He hadn't expected that Sousuke would be able to defeat the M9. Unable to hide his confusion, he uttered “absurd” and “what is that guy”.

“Well, what are you going to do?”

At what Kurama said, the Chief's eyes looked like he woke up from a dream.

“He's informed of the situation here. He's coming here full force with the intent to kill you.”

Chapter 4: Collateral Damage

White smoke came from the right flank; the M9 lay powerless above the rubble. Looking down at that unit, Sousuke spoke in the exterior speakers.

“Come out”

After a little while, there was a detonation in the head attached to the M9, blowing off the head part.

In the event that the chest hatch can't be moved, an escape device for emergencies is available. The pilot crawled out from that narrow escape opening in the head part.

Although the power system in the abdomen was destroyed, and the chest and cockpit had been badly damaged, the pilot had no major injuries.

Standing atop the rubble, the pilot said “Dammit” and removed his head gear.

He was in his 30's, a man with a tanned side moustache. The pilot suit was similar to the type Sousuke wore at Mithril.

Sousuke's Savage had already used up all of its weapons, but then living flesh cannot run away from an AS. The other man also knew this well and did not show any sign of a struggle.

“I thought you traveled here in desperation but...I was wrong. So everything was calculated. Being so familiar even with this M9's characteristics...exactly who are you?”

“I will be the one asking questions.”

After saying that, Sousuke knelt his unit beside the man. That alone was enough to intimidate him.

“I will have you talk about that M9 and your identity. You can't acquire that kind of unit simply with money.”

“You think I will honestly talk to you”

“Did you think I would honestly give up?”

He suddenly extended the AS’ left hand, grabbing hold of the man.

“Uo”

“Fighting with you has considerably worn my joints out. The grip control is also questionable.”

Although I don’t want to crush you, give up before your ribs are crushed.

The five rough fingers tightly grasped the body. The man struggled with his limbs.

“Hot isn’t it. One of the characteristics of the old model RK-91, as it doesn’t carry a cooling system.

“With continued fierce battles, the heat of the engine and hydraulic system is transmitted into the fingertips. If you weren’t wearing that pilot suit, you would be burned. But, even then, how many more seconds....”

“Alright, alright! I give in! I’ll talk just let go!” the man shouted, waving around both his hands.

After Sousuke let go the man fell down onto the rubble on his backside. He was breathing over his shoulder and gasping.

“Dammit...geez, you’re a cruel guy”

“You’re someone who should have been killed, be thankful that you’re alive”

While saying that, Sousuke operated the switch in his unit’s sensor. He was bothered that the Chief had not said a single word or sent a communication after his victory. If he planned to make him disappear here it would not be strange to have new AS attack here. But Sousuke didn’t detect that kind of movement.

“Are there other ASes drawing near?”

“No, it’s only me”

“How careless”

“It was unthinkable that the M9 would lose to the Savage. I also thought that.”

“Are you a soldier of Amalgam?”

Hearing the question Sousuke posed, the man went silent for a while. Then he gave a sarcastic smile.

“So that’s it huh. Well, in this kind of way, I’ll be fired immediately. No-this time it would be an execution.”

“Are you a soldier of Mithril?”

“That’s right.”

After the name Mithril came up, the man looked surprise.

“Until the other day that is. Wait, Could it be that you’re-”

“I was in the West Pacific Fleet. The SRT.”

“It’s no wonder you’re so knowledgeable about the M9-. *Tuatha de Danaan* huh. I heard that a tough lady leads it. Also that bastard chief- knowing that we were former comrades, he didn’t let me know.”

The man with a hard voice narrowed his eyes, and made a small sigh.

“Where were you?”

“I’m in the Mediterranean Fleet. Sergeant George Laplock. From the SRT.”

Laplock. It’s not that he hadn’t interacted with the other fleet members, but he didn’t remember the man’s name. However, this wasn’t unnatural. Having 4 fleets and a tactical headquarters, Mithril would have a number of members in the SRT. As for an unknown face, there would be many.

The man, Laplock, asked, “Do you know Ben Clouseau? Last year, he was assigned as a First Lieutenant there. Before he was assigned in my squad...”

“I know him well. More ever, what happened to the Mediterranean fleet? Why are you piloting the M9 under Amalgam? Tell me.”

“..... Probably, my whole fleet was completely wiped out. The base in the Aegean Sea was attacked; my comrades were most likely killed. I don’t even know how many survived.”

“Why were you saved?”

Laplock looked down and made a painful expression. It was like Sousuke had asked, “*Why are you living in shame?*”

“I was absent from the base. There was a simple operation with Basque. An Observation Mission using only one M9. After it was over, I returned to Hercules.”

Basque was one of the locations in Spain, an area where isolated independent movement and terrorism was not constant.

Hercules was a C-130 transport. It was not an unusual point.

Even for Sousuke’s Pacific Ocean fleet, there were many missions like that.

“By the time we noticed the disaster when we returned, the base was already taken over. There was only a small amount of fuel remaining in the transport, we couldn’t run away. The only landing runway was controlled by the enemy. And then we discussed-”

“Surrender, then”

“That’s right. I approached them with a deal. This unit.”

He glanced at the damaged M9.

“Making use of the M9 and its tactics- and then there is this and that. Amalgam also had information on the M9, in the end it was only the specs. With only opinions of the people who used it in the field, they themselves have not heard of it.”

“With only that the enemy gave their consent?”

Sousuke asked with doubt, Laplock kept silent, looking up at the Savage's Optic Sensor.

"Yeah" his voice rose, trembling. "-They gave their consent. They also practiced. They also needed an Aggressor. After being offered that kind of information and situation, Amalgam employed me."

"What about the others. The transport surrendered didn't it?"

"...I don't know. We were separated immediately after surrender, we didn't see each other."

"Are there others from Mithril that surrendered?"

"I don't know. But it wouldn't be strange if there were."

"What's Amalgam's plan?"

"I also don't know that. Speaking of the surprise attack Mithril is being chased into complete annihilation, there is no doubt that the scheme is above the multitude of fleets."

"What is their positioning activity? What is their organizational chart?"

"All I know is that, Bucharest, Tripoli, Corsica, The Crimea, Sri Lanka and Yemen. I don't know the details of the location, but I've seen the camp in the outskirts of Tripoli, somewhere in Ceylon. The others were not splendid establishments. Rather---they are bases that can always be withdrawn and constructed at anytime. Someone is preparing the equipment; the budget must have come from somewhere. Probably most of the members of Amalgam don't know the whole picture. They are always fluid, and dispersed the command center of the organization."

"Like the internet."

Originally, the internet, with the United States on the verge of nuclear attack from the Soviets, built a network for the survival

of a decentralized chain of command. Amalgam made use of this concept applied to a Terrorist Organization, ensuring their survival.

“That’s right. If you take down one another would take its place, having an accurate picture of all the organization, it is virtually impossible to destroy them. Nobody understands the truth. That’s where they’re strong.”

“However, you can’t make a decision. If a pyramid doesn’t have a summit....”

“It can’t. That’s not it. It’s just, slow. It’s not that I don’t grasp what I saw....I think that Amalgam is a ‘Democratic’ organization. Ironically it is mighty. To reach a conclusion, it takes time.

“I see”

That is why Sousuke had so much time while in Tokyo to “guard” Kaname.

If it was a fast decision making facility, there would have been a fierce attack following the Shun On incident.

Also for the A21 incident, that’s also true for the Pacific Chrysalis issue. And to determine exactly what would be the next hit. There were strange points in both incidents. There were many inefficient aspects.

But, what about looking at it from the perspective of the risks?

As a result, their operations were stopped by Mithril. And the personnel involved in the operations, as well as highly rare equipment fell into the hands of Mithril.

With careful analysis and examination, it was not strange that fatal information was obtained by the enemy organization---even after a considerable amount of time, Mithril was not able to grasp the information of Amalgam.

That's right. Even after many failures of bold operations, it was not a huge blow to them.

"I only came to Namsak the other day. I was at the Libyan camp until that time. A man called Kurama came, made me--"

"Did you say Kurama?"

Sousuke blurted out, Laplock knitted his brows.

"You know him?"

"A little. He's here?"

"Yeah. He's watching the battle right now. There is a mountain to the north-north east. That's the 'Grandstand' where the VIP guests are--"

At that time, there was a reaction in the infrared sensor.

"Wait."

<Direction 3-4-8. Distance 3000. Altitude 85 meters.>

Most likely the units sent by the Chief. A small attack copter headed their way. The Savage's sensor aimed at the target.

He put it to maximum magnification. The helicopter was loaded with Stub wings, a rocket launcher, and a cannon.

There was no mistake that they had the intention of killing Sousuke. They knew very well that he had no means of retaliating with his weapons.

"Looks like the time is up."

Sousuke smacked his lips and raised the engine output of the worn out unit.

"What are you planning?"

"I told you. Time is up."

Sousuke controlled the unit and extended his manipulator into the right arm of the exhausted M9. Grabbing the wrist of the M9 with both hands, he gripped it with full power.

Mustering the small amount of power in Sousuke's Savage he forcibly tore off the interior and exterior armor of the M9's

wrist. Together with the distorting sound of metal, he exposed the interior mechanism. Sousuke briskly controlled the Savage's manipulators, taking out the wire of the wire gun in the lower part of the M9.

"Hey, wait. That Savage doesn't have any more weapons right? How do you plan on fighting against them?"

The enemy helicopter was drawing near. At full speed, in its forward bent posture, Sousuke made the unit step left, reeling the wire from the M9 and swinging it overhead. Like a cowboy in a western film.

"Hide."

At the same time that Sousuke said this, the helicopter in range fired its rocket.

A large rocket spread from the lotus-like launcher. The Savage jumped to the right and evaded the attack. The rocket exploded in the area surrounding the unit.

Recovering from the attack, with the wire in hand, he threw the wire towards the helicopter in the sky.

The M9's wire gun was a special piece of equipment that allows a unit that weights 10 tons to maneuver mountains and urban areas. Shooting at a vertical cliff as an anchor, the unit was capable of running up. Even though the wire was only a mere 10 millimeter in diameter, it was made of tough metal and carbon fibers and could hold up to 10 times the weight of the unit in an instant--- in other words its toughness could bear a load more than 100 tons.

The wire traversed straight above into the enemy Helicopter's rotor; it coiled around it like an animal.

What came next was simple.

He gripping the base of the wire and pulled strongly with full force, collapsing the enemy helicopter at once. It crashed into the ground and exploded.

“Are you alive?”

Hearing Sousuke’s call, Laplock crawled out from the wreckage of the M9. He seemed to be in shock after the point-blank explosion and stepped with uncertainty.

“Yeah.”

“Although I have mountains of question, there is no time. You are-”

Sousuke smacked his lips.

Unlike the M9, the damaged old model Savage had no more room to take this man. To begin with, the overheating unit would not be able to carry Laplock.

“---enough, do what you like. Run away to anywhere.”

The man was more and more surprised.

“Run away? Me? You don’t understand. Why would-”

“I don’t have time to mind you, like I said”

“Wait. Could it be that you’re alone? You don’t have any friends coming?”

Suspicious of the words, Sousuke answered briefly.

“I don’t have comrades. I’m alone.”

“What did you say? Then, why are you fighting in a place like this?”

“I have something to pay Amalgam. I’m also in the same circumstances as you. While being away from the base, my comrades were massacred.

“.....”

He checked the condition of the unit.

Oil pressure was going down. A decent cooling system just came to a standstill. Nevertheless, it was better than being naked. After catching up to the enemy's tail, he couldn't just let go.

"An important thing was stolen. I'm definitely going to take it back from them."

"Hey hey. You're fighting them just because of only that reason!? Are you serious!?"

"...only that reason?"

The unit's generator output was rising. He cut off the oil pressure in the left arm; it saved some time in operation.

"For me that is enough reason. No matter what, I will recover it by any means. That's what I vowed."

That's right. Vowed.

In that classroom.

He turned around toward the direction where the Chief was. From behind the departing Savage, standing on top of a mountain of rubble, Laplock shouted.

"I don't understand! You're just a mercenary aren't you? When the wind blows you also change employer. Wasn't our style to follow the best terms!?"

Somehow, Laplock's words were bitter. Not towards Sousuke, but to someone far away- no, he was saying it to himself. That was how his voice sounded.

"That's right. In the life of migratory birds, that is essential."

"Then---"

"I'm no longer a mercenary. I'm just a man."

After uttering that, Sousuke moved his unit.

Laplock fell on his knees calling out something that a bad state external microphone was not able to pick up.



Michael Lemon, who had saved Ash and the maintenance crew, cleaned up the corpses of the killed corrupt policemen. Immediately his “men” started to move.

“What exactly are you people?”

Inside the van traveling on the unfinished road, Ash inquired. The other members of the maintenance crew, together with several of Lemon’s men, were sent back from the outskirts of Munamera Village.

“I think it would be better if you don’t know about the penetration.” Lemon replied, offended.

Ash waited for him to expand, but he noticed that Lemon was staying silent. He raised his voice and tried again, “I don’t understand. Explain it to me. How did you escape the detention cell? Are you some kind of spy? Were you keeping quiet from us all that time?”

“It’s true that I deceived you but that’s beside the point.”

“With that manner of speaking, there’s no way that I can understand!”

Then Lemon wrinkled his eyebrows, and with some difficulty he opened his lips.

“When I met you guys, it was really a coincidence. No matter how strong any team would be alright as long as there was a connection to the Arena in Namsak. That’s why when Nami gathered the funds, I thought of finding another connection that was suitable to handle. At any rate---excuse me but, you guys are too weak. Until that hits, you’re just on the category of a general plans. It’s just---”

“It’s just?”

“On that day, when Sousuke came I changed my mind. His knowledge of ASes and others, there are others but- it’s his

demeanor that drew me. He's young but he's accustomed to fighting. I understood immediately. I knew."

After muttering that, Lemon's facial expression became gloomy and sobering. It was similar to his face when he had ordered his men to kill the corrupt policemen.

"That's why let your body flow with the current. That's what I think. In any case, it is not half hearted to get close to that organization. But it's impossible; I didn't think that his goal was similar to ours."

With the enigmatic words of Lemon, Ash could only shake his head.

"I can't understand at all. After all, where are you guys from?"

Lemon gave a bitter smile.

"An information department from a certain country. My country is being pulled by the line by Amalgam and Mithril."

"I really don't understand, Monsieur."

Ash grumbled, then Lemon finally smiled.



Sousuke used every trick he knew to continue. The weariness of his unit was almost at its limits. Many warning lamps were flickering inside the cockpit. It was just like the decorative lights on a Christmas Tree.

Before he had reached the "Grandstand" over the mountains that Laplock had pointed out to him, his unit's hydraulics temperature needle had reached over its limits. Losing oil- to a human it was like losing blood- after resupplying, it could still work some more, but this was not that time.

Sousuke stopped the unit, opened the cockpit hatch and got out.

“.....”

From the lock in the cockpit side, he took out his favorite pistol and magazine and got down into the ground. An Australian made Glock 19.

The feeling of insufficient heat was undeniable. If necessary, he would have to deal with one man then two. Then after, it would be good to take a weapon off the enemy.

The mountain where the “Grandstand” sat was a stereotypical forest shrouded with broadleaf trees. Sousuke, within the darkness, raced in the thick trees, turning from the east bank. At first he was in a difficult situation with a pitch black field of vision, but slowly his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness.

How many sentries will he run into? Sousuke headed close to the highway on the east side of the mountain.

The map of the neighborhood had been stored in his head. He was familiar with the vegetation and surroundings, having fought in South East Asia a few years ago.

Advancing in the darkness, he saw a concrete gate installed on the slope of the mountain. The gate was enclosed on four corners with barbed wire, illuminated by a strong light. There were also a suitable number of guards. Not far from this gate, getting closer to Sousuke’s Savage, pilots were loitering around the neighborhood, but it was not unreasonable.

If he left things alone, with himself hiding in the thicket, he might be discovered by the lookouts.

Well, what now?

Sousuke was losing interest in attacking the enemy camp. Then there was a new movement in front of the gate.

In front of the gate coming out from a patrol car of Namsak city, two policemen and one girl got out.

It was Nami.

Then, from the inside of the gate, the targeted man appeared. A private army surrounded the two men. One was the Chief- the other one was him!

That's right, it was Kurama.

He had a tall solid figure. Even with the sweltering climate of Southeast Asia, he wore a black coat.

Kurama glanced at Nami, firmly grasping the girl he thrust an automatic pistol to her jaw.

"Sagara! Are you watching? If you are then you understand!"

His loud voice resounded. He had guessed that Sousuke was lurking nearby.

"Come out and throw away your weapon! If you don't, I'll kill her! I'll give you 10 seconds!"

Nami's small form started shaking uneasily with extensive nervousness.

The atmosphere of the tropics late at night was humid and heavy; no wind was blowing in the many trees. Countless insects and reptiles, nocturnal birds and small animals concealed their breath and looked down on Sousuke crouching in the dim light. Many unemotional eyes. It was no different from the sensor of the AS, the functioning eye that gathered exterior information, silently staring at the back of Sousuke. Like some cold fate reaching unto him.

"....10!"

The private army of the Chief surrounded Nami. It was not a number someone could take out in an instant.

However-

“...9!”

If it's that Kurama, he's serious. It's not just some bluff. Besides-why? What a bad premonition.

“...8!”

What now. It was the first time for these feelings. Actually-actually- he felt like something bad would happen. Something he could not recover from.

“...7!”

7 more seconds. Only 7 more seconds.

If he moved out of this thicket now, what would happen? Would he forcibly shoot to kill? Kurama was not a forgiving man.

“...6!”

One second felt like one minute, next it felt like one day, before long it was a week, and then became a month.

If he went out, Nami might not be saved. He was originally a human who had nothing to do with this. But, there was no mistake that he would be killed. With the way things had unfolded up to this point, Kurama had every reason to do so.

He had been passing through a suitable amount of bloodshed. Nevertheless he had survived somehow. Suddenly he was stuck in this place.

“...5!”

There was no reason for Nami to die here. A blameless girl who had nothing to do with the battle of Mithril and Amalgam was going to die in a place like that. But, he couldn't think about dying there. What would happen if he died? Who would save Kaname? Who would make sure that Leonard and the rest of Amalgam paid for their sins?

“....4!”

Dying there, that conclusion was not permitted. Do what you can, bring all that you have- technical skill, experience,

physical strength, knowledge, everything- use that to strike the world, take back Chidori Kaname from those people. After that, die in a blaze.

That's why, you cannot die here.

That was the same for Nami. Her hometown was destroyed- to be able to go back to her peaceful school Nami was fighting hard with her Savage. If he tried a little harder, Nami would have made her dream so much closer to reality. For her, she could not accept that everything ended there.

Between him and the girl, which one was Kurama coercing? In either case the battle couldn't be changed. In either case the countdown could not be reversed.

In contrast to his hesitation, Sousuke, from some time ago, was groping for that third choice. A way to end up with him and Nami both not being dead. A bright way of doing it. Thinking up every possibility, he was scrutinizing at high speed.

“....3!”

Can't. Can't go out.

Is there no other way? At the very least, he had three more seconds to think. Kurama's countdown had a possibility of being just a bluff. If he hid until the last minute, that guy might think “he's not here after all, it was a misunderstanding”, and might pass up the chance to kill Nami. No, that's wasn't it. If he declared he will shoot then he will surely shoot. He wouldn't think of changing his mind in front of the people surrounding him.

What would be the best course? Is there no way? There must be some other---

“....2!”

He can't. He has to go out.

He would have extended the 2 second delay. There was no way to escape from the dilemma of buying time. That's right, must go out-

"No, I've changed my mood"

Kurama didn't call for "1". He thrust Nami casually, aimed at her back and mercilessly fired.

Most probably with a 45 caliber from the sound of the gunshots.

He continued with 3 more shots.

All hit. Nami's small body trembled bit by bit at the shots. Inside the searchlights, red liquids were splashed. From what could be seen, it was obvious Kurama didn't miss the vitals.

Nami's facial expression couldn't be seen.

She wasn't even staggering. The girl was just like a puppet controlled by a string, falling in place.

".....!"

No sound escaped him. A lifetime of soldier training and being accustomed to it was the only way he managed to stay still and quite. It was an automatic reaction, like being unable to make a disadvantageous tactical move should anything happen.

Why?

Why did he shoot?

Why didn't you even say "1"?

I planned on showing up. Like you wished, I planned to come out from here. Even then, this shouldn't be happening. Don't your rules even have standards?

His body burned with an overwhelming fury that tried his self control and his determination. Those two emotions conflicted and Sousuke's body was like a small explosion.

"I can feel it! Your anger!"

The Chief and the private were dumbfounded by the sudden events. Standing in the midst of the corrupt policemen armed with carbine guns, hands raised slowly, Kurama called.

“Good killing instinct! You’re close by after all. The killing intent intended for me is brimming in every corner of this dense thicket. You understand right? That’s right, isn’t this the life? The atmosphere is trembling, Sagara Sousuke!”

How dare you.

Automatic pistol in hand, from the shadow of the leafy cover he headed without a sound towards Kurama. The distance was roughly around 100 meters. There was barbed wire in the way.

Shall he kill that guy now?

It was useless.

It would be better if he had a rifle, but he had a short pistol. It won’t hit a target at 100 meters. A pistol was such a weapon. Even if he hit, he still wouldn’t know if the wounds from a 9 millimeter would be fatal at this distance. Moreover, Kurama purposely wore a black coat in the middle of such a sweltering climate; it was like the same bulletproof vest from a previous confrontation.

There was no significance in shooting. He wouldn’t be killed.

And then the enemy would react from the gunshot there, sending a number of soldiers. If they knew his position and direction even Sousuke couldn’t run from that number of people. He could probably only take about ten people with him, and then it would be over. That was why Sousuke did not move during the countdown.

“Do you want to kill me!?”

Kurama raised his voice again.

“Why don’t you come here right away? No need to hesitate. Do want you want. If you’re going to demonstrate your splendid self control, that would be fine. Why don’t you get affection from the no good bystanders in this good for nothing country your whole life. Just...let me tell you this. If you leave me alone, I will give this treatment to that important woman of yours!”

It’s no other, it was about Chidori Kaname. Kurama knew that.

“That’s right, I know her whereabouts! Coming out from here and there, I’m getting irritated from your interruptions. I’m going back to that place, I feel like I want to FUCK that woman. Leonard- that affectionate boy, in place of that worthless Gauron! I’m going to force it like this pathetic girl over here! How about it, Sagara Sousuke!?”

All of it was provocation. He knew that.

Kurama was not a normal hoodlum. He was a refined cold hearted professional. All of this was is his tactic to end the tranquility, nothing more than that. This was to expand the search perimeter and discover the surroundings.

However-

Shooting Nami and referencing Kaname made the inside of Sousuke’s heart shake.

Kurama sounded a sigh through his nose.

“....well, he’s not coming out huh. Then just watch. I’m a harsh man, remember that.”

Aiming at the motionless Nami stretched down on the damp ground, Kurama sot a bullet.

“....!”

It was already unendurable.

At the same time that Sousuke, who has lost discretion, stood up, there was shooting in the other direction from where he was at, attacking Kurama. And there were a number of them.

Gunshots sounded from Assault Rifles and Sub Machine guns. There were 8 men in the thicket, no, there were more than that.

A number of policemen surrounding Kurama fell down from the bullets of the raid; also a few searchlights were sniped. In the vicinity of the gate, wrapped in darkness, the enemy shouted, screamed, and fired in a haphazard way. A grenade flew from somewhere, aimed at the parked patrol car, causing a flashy explosion.

Where were they from?

No, this was not the time to think that. Anyhow, take advantage of this opportunity. Take down Kurama immediately.

Sousuke flew out from the thicket, running past the slowly developing broadleaf tree.

Before the fence, the private army of the Chief with carbine guns in hand was present. Trembling from the sudden raid, they looked in the wrong direction. At just under 5 meters, the enemy noticed him.

“Wha...”

There was no chance to retaliate. Sousuke steadily aimed. Without stopping, he did not hesitate to shoot.

Just one shot. It was an accurate headshot. There was no excuse at this distance. Inserting the Glock in the back of his belt, he took up the carbine gun and magazine. Confirming that the first bullet had entered the chamber, he changed the selector from Full auto to Semi auto.

The gate's surrounding was now a melting pot of confusion. Gunfire and bellows were mixed with cloud of dust from the

impacts. The black flames from the burning patrol car and the dim light visibility got worse.

Sousuke swiftly shot two enemies ahead of him.

One who was desperate, not knowing where the attack was coming from, and the other who saw Sousuke for an instant and then died. Passing beside the two dead bodies rolling on the ground, Sousuke noticed something. The first one that was killed was the man who had hit him in the police station's interrogation room. His name was unknown. And wouldn't be know from now on.

Finding a handy shelter in the shade of the obliquely slant Patrol Car full of bullets, Sousuke investigated again the surrounding situation.

It seemed that the attackers had complete dominance. Not only because it was a surprise attack. The attackers, compared to the corrupt policemen, won in terms of training and tactics. In front of the opened space at the gate where Kurama and the others were standing, they were steadily prepared and established a "Killing Zone". It was from the unit in a semi-circle formation. Then they concentrated their attack in that area and in a short amount of time had obliterated the enemy forces into smithereens. A standard raid and ambush.

He couldn't be careless. Still not knowing whether the attacking forces were allies or enemies, if Sousuke were to enter the plaza where Kurama went to earlier, there was no mistake that he would become a target without mercy.

How sarcastic.

Thus, in the flurry of gunfire in the middle of the danger zone, he became composed. He watched the surrounding 360 degrees, the power and movement of each force, and read accurately the positional relationship and tactics. The violent emotions from earlier were no longer present.

And then- Sousuke himself was surprised. Since coming out from the thicket until coming there he had not been thinking of Nami. Bearing a fatal wound, she was left behind in the middle of war with flurry of bullets.

He couldn't see Kurama from there.

They had turned the place where he had been into a place of massacre. As long as he was alive, Kurama could have gone inside the gate and escaped through a rough tunnel drilled into the mountain. It was possible-

Sousuke could hear the roar of an engine and tire screeching. Kurama could be getting away in the rough tunnel, possibly-

In front of his eyes, over the thick black smoke, one patrol car started to run. Narrowly, he saw the back of the head of a large built man in the driver seat. In the passenger seat was the Chief.

Sousuke smacked his lips. Kurama was aiming for the tunnel, running away in the opposite direction. He had found an operational car and was escaping this dangerous area with full force.

Shifting his body, Sousuke quickly put the bonnet on top of his carbine gun and changed the selector. He aimed at Kurama's patrol car and fiercely fired on full auto. He pushed on to the jumping gun barrel, pulling the trigger without mercy.

The enemy car was splashed with sparks and the glass of the rear window broke. Even then the patrol car did not stop, but continued to accelerate.

The bullets were consumed just like that. The figure of the patrol car's rear got smaller.

The shrubs in the highway were obstacles. Difficult to aim around. The car look like it was the size of a fist, no, now it looked more like the size of a thumb. Removing the magazine in his

pocket, he reloaded. And then shot all the bullets. Rifle bullets were spit out of the muzzle, relentlessly piling into the patrol car. But even then the target was too far.

He reloaded the last magazine. The car continued to drive, becoming the size of a grain, heading for the hill-

“Dammit...!”

It was already useless. Sousuke moaned softly, fingers still on the trigger; he finally ordered it to “stop”.

The patrol car that Kurama and the chief rode could no longer be reached.

He stood by helplessly.

Feeling resentment at himself for letting the enemy escape, with the shadow of the car hidden, Sousuke thought of his next move. Should he escape, or should he remain?

In the field of vision of a hesitant Sousuke, there came a shadow. It was not one of the Chief’s men. It even had a different uniform. Sousuke aimed the gun suddenly and the opponent faced him with his palms up.

“Stop, Sousuke!” he said.

It was Michael Lemon who was supposed to be in a dirty jail cell in Namsak.



The battle ended shortly thereafter.

A number of patrol cars continued to burn and there was still black smoke spewing in the area. All of the private army of the Chief were either dead or had run away. There was no one still moving in the slaughter area.

The attackers could be seen confirming their spoils of war in the forest. They were searching with caution, carefully covering the grounds.

In the black uniform, there was a tactical vest full of pockets. If necessary a bullet proof plate could also be inserted. It also had a balaclava cap, and Passive infra-red vision goggles. No, rather than goggles, they were more like large sunglasses.

Even with the abundance of equipments their movements were swift. They had the characteristics of a well trained military organization.

Their guns were dangling randomly at their shoulders, their posture was straight, and they had a unique way of walking. The smallest unit was a two man team. They guarded each direction, without negligence, proceeding with organic cooperation. Watching over the ally's back and striking the companion's shoulder. Even when confirming the dead bodies of the enemy on the ground, they did not approach casually. Especially when both hands of the corpse could not be seen.

“What's the meaning of this?” Sousuke inquired.

“Leave it for later,” Lemon said with a melancholic voice.

That's right.

Walking to the completely controlled plaza in front of the gate, they immediately saw Nami.

Black blood spread over the unfinished pavement.

In there she sunk.

He had seen this scene a number of times, but Sousuke felt like an invisible reaper was gripping on his heart.

He felt goose bumps all over his body.

The girl was not moving.

She was no longer emitting an anguished voice.

She lay there, without tears, even without blinking. No words remained that could be said.

Of course.

The bullets were shot by Kurama. Her vitals- heart and lung, also the big injuries to the large arteries- had been hit with deadly accuracy. If the supply of blood to the brain was cut off, consciousness would be lost in a matter of seconds; then you would lose the functions of the body forever. The head was a hollow point wasn't it? With the impact of a large diameter bullet, she would have lost her consciousness instantly. At least, that was what he wished for.

He couldn't think of any compensation.

Everything was decided at that instant.

In that one second.

The one second that Sousuke hesitated.

"How could this be?" Lemon murmured with a trembling voice.

"How could this be?" Lemon repeated, kneeling beside her, letting out a pharyngeal weep. He put his gun on top of the mud and embraced the girl who had lost her strength, shaking her shoulders. Before long the trembling spread to his arms, head and feet; his whole body shivered.

Sousuke could not let out a sound.

He simply stood there exhausted; turning around simple words in his brain and staring vacantly.

Dead.

Nami.

Got involved.

One more second.

Why didn't I go out?

Why didn't I hurry?

Got involved.

Even though she did nothing wrong.

I let her die.

Nami.

School.

One more second.

What would others do?

I got her involved.

Choices.

Brought upon myself.

Unforgivable.

Nami.

I got her involved.

I let her die.

Just like Lemon, it would be good if his whole body could tremble and cry. At most, if only he could let the 35 kilo weight of the gun in his hand fall to the ground.

What would be an appropriate reaction for a time like this—no, what would be the natural reaction to come out? He knew the symbolism, but he didn't know the true feelings.

Ash of the maintenance crew appeared from somewhere and started crying and swearing at him.

“You’re not human. Why didn’t you help her? Did you only use her? This good girl. You are the scum of the humans. Say something. Don’t you feel anything?”

Even then Sousuke was completely expressionless, standing exhausted in that place.



In an operational car filled with bullet holes Kurama headed to the south on a bending and warped road.

South- towards the town area of Namsak.

Both headlights were broken and the roads at night were not illuminated, but he didn't mind and let the car fly. Because the cracked windshield was distorting his field of vision, he carelessly hit it with his fist to break it.

The fragments flew into the passenger seat and the Chief let out a groan.

"Exactly what happened?"

Unable to hide his bewilderment, the Chief raises his voice. With so much wind blowing in the car, and with the muffler lost, his voice did not reach.

"My private army- my private army was annihilated! It was the associates of that Sagara right!?"

"You're a little mistaken."

On the right shoulder, taking out the metal plate from his bullet proof coat, Kurama said, "If he had more colleagues, then he would have been trying to buy time cleverly. The response was also slow, there was no cooperation."

"Then who are they?"

"I still don't know. They're also not the remains of Mithril."

"I can't believe it. Wasn't it a trap from the start? I was manipulated by your mistaken information, something like that-"

Excited, Kurama grabbed violently at the collar of the Chief who was accusing him.

"...uh?"

"You don't even have a guarantee" Kurama told him in a deathly voice. "Well, we didn't talk elaborately on that. Whoever those people were, or how they were connected to Sagara, we will

find that out soon. It's not a problem. The problem of what happened there is just simple. It's really simple. After all--"

As Kurama increasingly tightened his grip on his throat and neck, the Chief let out a muffled scream.

"Uh...h..hard to breath"

"--after all. The policemen that were following you were an amateur group. Inferior to a watch dog. Allowing the enemy to get that close..."

"I'm, I'm sorry, Monsieur. But...."

"Listen carefully. I'm pissed. I can't stomach that brat in front of my eyes, even the destruction of the M9 was not fun. Even shooting the woman. When it comes to the perverted bastards you guys are, getting aroused from something like that, a civilized person like me is different. I'm annoyed."

"But then- I don't know. Why did you have to shoot that girl? That, wasteful method--"

"That was enough. If that would piss him off. I'm different from an idiot villain from a cheap looking police drama. If I say 'kill' I will firmly kill. And I had no sense of duty to seriously adhere to the ten count. That's right, life is short. That's that I wanted that guy to know."

"...but"

"That guy will definitely chase after me. He will be tightening up to kill me. And he purposely worked hard to look for me."

"....."

"Are you going to run? They already made preparations for when you return to the city. If you stay with me, will they come. Then we'll smash them when they come. I will need your cooperation. Do you understand?"

The Chief, who was not able to let a sound out, could only nod.

Somewhat slacking the fingers, Kurama let the Chief go. The Chief coughed a little, glaring at him. He was no longer able to hide his hatred.

“Monsieur. This treatment is going too far-! I contributed to the organization, managing Namsak. And then, like this-”



“Sorry. Your high pitched voice was getting on my nerves. And then-”

After saying that Kurama searched his coat pocket and opened the cigarette case he took out. In the case was a clean carrot stick cut into quadrilateral pieces.

One stick being preserved, he held it in his mouth like a cigarette.

“-speaking to a man who stopped smoking, it would be better to be careful. Because, as you can imagine, he is very irritated.”



How did he chase him from here? He surely didn't know.

Kurama would get far away from Namsak; he might run into a place where Sousuke couldn't reach. But if he were late in the pursuit, for even one second, the possibility would be enlarged exponentially.

In order for Sousuke to chase Kurama with the car, the remaining car in the area was not enough. Since this was the outskirts of Munamera, the road towards Namsak would continue like a snake having a stomach ache. It wouldn't be far for a straight line but, if you take the actual road, the distance would be three times more.

Another effective means came to mind, but he would need to make use of an emergency repair to the badly damaged Savage. If he was in the AS he wouldn't need to take the road. Disregarding the bending and warped road, he could immediately cross the steep terrain. Even considering the amount of time for repair, it was still an effective plan.

Without even time to explain to each other their identities, Sousuke brought the plan to Lemon, and Lemon approved.

Sousuke returned with the Savage that he had left in the forest, and quickly brought the unit to the front gate. Lemon and the others had already made the preparations and proceeded with the emergency repair of the unit. Ash from the maintenance crew, who was still there, did not help.

The damaged hydraulic system was patched with a forced taping, taking the unknown oil from inside the tunnel, they poured it in the similar diesel to the fuel tank. If this were another AS, it would not have worked.

They also found only one weapon. It was brought in from the tunnel. It had the appearance of a new kind of HEAT Hammer. That only would be very good.

But the savage had been damaged by the battle with the M9, and it was not possible to get it back to the best condition. After changing the parts they could it was still in urgent need of a whole new fuselage.

Lemon and the others gave a surprisingly loud cry.

“Can it move with just only that?”

“For a little,” Sousuke replied with a dark voice.

If it were in a different circumstance, the Savage by all means was tough, this was his opinion. No, it wasn't just his. Even the girl who was the owner of this unit would explain with pride that it was this unit's strength.

But she was not here anymore.

She wasn't.

The emergency repairs were finished.

Sousuke, with little words, ascended the military unit and got in the cockpit.

He started up the electronic system and used the remaining standby energy to restart the engine. He checked the hydraulics and drive system and tested the optical sensor. Firearms control is...

“Sousuke!”

The noise was from the suspicious communication system; it was Lemon’s voice that came out.

“What?”

“Let me tell you this. I’m definitely a guy from an intelligence agency. But by meeting you and Nami by chance, it was unexpectedly fun.”

“Right.”

Kneeling on the side of the girl, Lemon’s whole body was shivering. Sousuke knew that, at least, was not an act.

Then, what about himself, who had stood there silently?

“Beyond that...you’re a soldier of Mithril?”

“Former Mithril. Right now I’m not.”

He continued to operate the unit. He closed the cockpit block. Lock. He glared at the hydraulics and connected the drive system.

“All of you are DGSE agents. You colleagues are similar to the 29 SA. Isn’t that right?”

DGSE. French Foreign Security Directorate. 29 SA was the 29th Mobile Bureau. The DGSE was known for their special forces. They were also on the streets of Namsak finding anything related to Amalgam, and attempting to infiltrate them.

“I’m surprised. You knew that much.”

“It’s a guess. And then, whatever.”

Sousuke felt desperation inside.

He had heard that Ash and the others were ordered by the Chief to be killed. Lemon and the others had saved them. This was unexpected to Sousuke, it was a mistake. The Chief and Kurama

targeting Sousuke was natural, and he could stop it, but he did not think that it would make it to a point that Ash and the others would end up being targeted.

He was not able to see the big picture of the enemy. Sousuke's naïve perspective had resulted in this pain. If Lemon had not intervened, not only Nami but Ash would also be dead.

If he was alone, he thought he could deal with protecting the safety of his co-workers. In other words, he got caught up in trying to catch up with Amalgam and became impatient.

Even with the unbearable regret in his heart, Sousuke couldn't stop. It was like some supreme motive, not just a strong will that pushed him. Right now he was not even thinking about the name of the girl he was searching for. He couldn't even remember that smile.

But, he didn't know what else to do.

If he stopped there, he felt that he would disappear without knowing anything at all.

He had to go after Kurama.

He had to capture him, torture him, and take information.

What did he expect to hear? What would be useful now? Sousuke was not thinking of anything.

The connection was complete. Carefully raising the output of the engine, he slowly stood the unit up. This would probably be the last time the white Savage that Nami loved as the "Crossbow" would stand up like this.

"I'm going," Sousuke murmured with a dim fire of sadness and gloom embracing his heart.

Chapter 5: Burning Man

That evening the streets of Namsak were wrapped in a bizarre atmosphere.

The temperature lowered to around 10 degrees Celsius in a matter of hours. Getting so cold was not common in such a tropical area. It was abnormal weather for that region.

Massive and heavy clouds rolled in the night sky. An ominous thunder roared. Mostly, the atmospheric arrangements that had come off the Pacific Ocean that year were strange. But even simple people could feel some sort of evil omen in the coldness of that night.

It was not only the weather that was bizarre.

The Arena was falling asleep after the end of the day's games. 10 units of Arm Slaves had begun to move their generators. The growl of diesel and Gas Turbine engines echoed in the atmosphere, shaking the cold night sky of Namsak. The atmosphere was more subdued than usual. It was not like its usual rough and cheerfully wild air; it was gloomier. The killing intent of hidden animals rippled buoyantly in the air.

A number of units could be seen in the dazzling illumination.

The Russian Made RK-91 Savage. That Customized RK-92 Savage (a copy of the Northern Chinese Rk-92). The France manufactured Mistral, and its successor the Mistral 2. The German manufactured Drache A type. English manufactured Cyclone. The others were Israel manufactured and South African manufactured units.

The painted coat of these units were not the military's Olive, Khaki, and green camouflage colors, but were rich colors resembling that of the F1 machines. There were also a number of units with the logo of their local or enterprise sponsors.

All of the AS had appeared after hours in the Arena. The pilots were facing the direction of the Chief. They had all gathered in the arena because of an urgent call and were preparing for a special "Job".

The Chief had arrived in his patrol car (which was mostly shattered glass full of bullet holes). Many of the pilots had already received instructions about the "job" from the Vice Chief over the wireless radio. Those who had were joking with each other about the authority they had received. Once the Chief stepped out from the broken car the Vice Chief announced his arrival to the rowdy men.

"Concentrate!!"

The Chief thrust his chest out and looked over the faces of the men with tightened lips.

"...Now, you have heard from the Vice Chief. There is a man who controls an AS, he will be coming to Namsak from the north. That guy is a dangerous terrorist, who is overdosed with drugs with an abnormal persecution complex. The request for you, gentlemen, is to fight with that guy. That guy will be invading the streets; before he puts harm to the virtuous citizens, you veterans will eliminate him. Make certain to kill him. Show your skills which have been polished in the Arena."

The men looked doubtful from the chief's unconcerned chatter.

"Boss, can we ask a question?" one of the pilots voiced out. It was Dao, the first to have had a match with Sousuke.

"Ask away."

“Honestly speaking, whether the guy we’re going to kill is a terrorist or not, we really don’t care. What we want to know are the terms. We still haven’t heard of any compensation or support. Can you explain that, Boss?”

“I understand. First everyone will get \$3000 dollars. This is regardless of results.”

After the chief pompously said that, everyone blew a whistle.

“And then the one who buries the terrorist will be given 10 times that, which is \$300,000 dollars. And then there is also some addition. Last month, do you know what was received from Gaza in the storehouse? It was an item which was took off a Chinese Dealer. There was 50 kilo of heroine confiscated. Tomorrow, the ‘Official procedures’ shall be burned. And the same quantity of ‘White Powder’ will coincidentally fall into the hands of someone. Where that would lead to, I have no interest of revealing. Do you understand what this means?”

50 kilos of Heroine. Even with its purity its ending cost could easily reach \$1,000,000 dollars. The Chief was indirectly saying that the person who buried the enemy would attain this prize.

“That’s really glamorous but...aren’t you too generous Boss?” Dao asked.

“There is no need for you gentlemen to worry. What is important is for the terrorist to be killed. For that reason there are enough accessories, oil, and fuel prepared. And then....take a look.”

Just then, five trailers entered the area. The trailers slowly approached the curb, and stopped before them, opening to show their load. In them were a number of used AS mobile weapons, completely accommodating their needs.

The German made 35mm Rifle. The same German made 57mm Sniper rifle. Italian made 57mm shot gun. American made 30mm Gatling cannon. Also a Swiss made 40mm Rifle. There were also the newest Liquid explosives: the kind that didn't have heavy cases around them.

“Amazing. It's an Oerlikon.”

“There's also Oto Melara and Mauser”

“Bofors too”

Either way, with just one shot it had enough destructive power to pulverize a passenger vehicle.

Since the men were overly excited, the Chief said, “There are no encryptions to the weapons control system on these guns. Choose what you like, use what you like. There is enough ammunition.”

“We have to thank that guy, Chief. Would it be alright to fire these babies? We won't be held responsible to the ‘Virtuous Citizens’ who live in Namsak.”

The men laughed. From the patrol car full of bullet holes the dark man, Kurama, got up and addressed the ones riding the ASes.

“Listen up. The Chief said use what you like.”

Some of the pilots stared at Kurama and the Chief, evaluating.

“Looks like there's no need to hesitate.”

“I've always wanted to do this.”

“The prey is ‘Crossbow’ right? That cheeky amateur.”

Dao and the other men, with the targeted weapons in their hands, returned to their own units.

Grasping different weapons and scrambling, the richly colored giants left the arena. The ground shook fiercely with the sounds of footsteps.



After seeing of the ASes the Chief said to Kurama, “The information is here. In the farm 15 kilometers north of Namsak, a white AS is heading south. That guy really is gonna do it.”

“Didn’t I tell you?”

Massaging his refined neck with his right hand, Kurama said, “With those hoodlums, it would be a mystery if they could stop that guy.”

“Impossible. There are 10 units of ASes completely equipped. The pilots aren’t amateurs either. Even though there was a mistake with the M9, this time...”

“I’m hoping for that. But, we have to prepare ourselves”

“Prepare?”

“We’ll do what we want over here. Then prepare via wireless radio. Because we have to let him know where his goal point is.”

“Goal point?”

The Chief turned and glanced at Kurama with a dubious face.

Kurama said, “This place is the mark.”



Using every bit of the Hydraulic system, Sousuke’s white Savage headed south from the overgrown shrubs in the hills.

He traversed a number of paved roads, getting closer to Namsak. Every now and then he saw a residence intended for low income people.

To get to the center of the town from here he had to cross the Shenton River that crossed from the Northwest curvature of the city to the north.

Originally the Savage was equipped with a river crossing capability, but equipping the unit with an air supply mechanism snorkel was not necessary. The unit had received a lot of damage; the electrical system’s water tightness was also compromised.

Moreover, without a way to gauge the water's depth, entering the river would be suicide.

There were two bridges that would allow the solid 12 tons of the Savage to cross: the Purinoko Bridge, which was off the highway, and the Wasaru Bridge, which was 1 kilometer to the south. There was no mistake that both bridges were guarded by the police. After coming to Namsak Sousuke had committed the terrain to his memory. Based on this mental map he chose the Purinoko Bridge. This was because it was the closest to the city center.

If Kurama were to try and urgently escape by himself, he would have to reach the airport. But according to Michael Lemon via the wireless radio, Kurama had not appeared at the airport. Lemon was behind Sousuke in a car heading for Namsak. His comrades, the agents of DGSE, were observing the airport.

Kurama was still in Namsak.

Sousuke never thought that Kurama would be chased into the streets, but it was possible that there was some trouble and he was just late in escaping-

No...

That was not possible. He was waiting.

He was making preparations and putting things in order for the battle. He himself was going to fight, to go for the kill. This time he certainly had the determination to kill.

Sousuke understood that well. It was not super natural reasoning, but more of a gut feeling. Kurama knew Sousuke's anger. Sousuke also, knowing that Kurama knew this, continued to move. Both of them were pros, both of them had killed an ally.

With two pros being pushed this far, they may have been able to avoid danger and simply wait for the next opportunity to

present itself. If the opponent had not been Kurama, Sousuke would have thought of that as a possibility.

But this time was different.

Before a mountainous pile of rational strategy was a lot of irrational and absurd super mathematics. Nobody knew how a pair of ones will become two, but otherwise there would be numbers, and people would not know. It was understandable that men wondered at the mathematics of life and death lurking at the borderline. Even those men were not able to explain it to others.

With the elliptical significance, Sousuke and Kurama were Comrades in Arms.

Of course both had mutual hatred looming, and by no means could have a compromise. However, something was understood. It was just like it had been with Gauron, in a room in Hong Kong, when he had accurately seen through the true nature of Sousuke.

His unit was nearing the Purinoko Bridge.

The width of the river was around 600 meters, and the black water surface flickered with the lights cast from street lamps. No, not only the street lamps; rotating blue lamps were also shining.

Before the bridge there were 2 patrol cars and one armored car, creating a check point. Aside from the policemen that were carrying Shotguns and carbine guns, a turret machine gun was installed on the roof of the armored car.

Sousuke changed his facial expression and operated the unit's power level. He understood the tired engine's expression: move subtly and discretely, but with determination.

Suddenly the oil pressure gauge was shaking bit by bit and the unit's temperature needle started rising critically.

No worries, it could still make it.

The warm open air rising from his machine was in sharp contrast to that area's coldness.

The Savage's engine was roaring. He accelerated, trampling the ground with heavy movements.

The policemen warned him to "stop". Sousuke did not stop. To the Savage, the bullets of the infantry were like small drops of rain, a small annoyance. The unit accelerated and kicking the armored car.

He broke through.

The armored car turned sideways. Policemen ran away.

Sousuke hurriedly pushed the unit forward and crossed the bridge at full speed. While on the bridge he was without shelter. It took him mere seconds to cross.

He reached a short building in the town area and suddenly stopped. The heel of the Savage bore at the asphalt and white clouds of dirt trailed behind him.

"....."

The engine's output was diminishing, but he stopped to listen.

Around 5 or 6 residents came up the road, pointing their fingers in his direction. In Namsak it was not rare to have an AS walk on the roadway, but the residents sensed the Savage's unusual bearing and they didn't go near it.

Even after listening he had gleaned no new information. It was totally different from the high efficiency sensor of the M9. Judging that it would be better to continue moving, Sousuke started up his unit.

When the "Enemy units" came, that would be the time.

2 units of ASes were heading up the street, passing the corners of four blocks. A Savage and a Mistral 2. They each had a Shot cannon and rifle in their hands.

They were not from the military. The Savage was a loud purple, and the Mistral 2 had a red/yellow two tone color.

They were the ASes from the Arena.

The Chief must have employed these guys. Veteran pilots with enough weapons. What troublesome opponents.

Sousuke only had one HEAT Hammer to fight against the weapons of these units.

The enemy units noticed something and retraced their steps.

Sousuke raised his unit's engine output once again. He made his unit run towards a building for cover to avoid the enemy's aim.

"It starts huh..." Sousuke murmured, his voice echoing in the coldness.

He removed the safety pin of his HEAT Hammer. It was like turning a key inside himself and cancelling the safety equipment.

The Mistral 2's ring name was "Diamond Head". He didn't have a special connection with the Savage he was walking with; it's just that they both took a position near each other. When the policemen at the Purinoko Bridge called them they had immediately headed to the same place.

Rather, the Savage beside him (ring name "Super Star", 2 wins 5 loses) by all means wanted the enemy for himself.

"He's here, just ahead."

"Heh, walking unconcerned. What a stupid fool."

"Make some room! He's my prey!"

\$30,000 dollar and 50 kilos of Heroine.

Only by dealing with that white Savage, "Crossbow", could they gain that. In this case, Super Star was not accustomed to thinking of being shot in the back.

But Diamond Head would selfishly consider it if the opportunity presented itself.

Then Crossbow, who had disappeared by running into a building, appeared for a second time with a light step.

He had no weapons on hand. The distance was about 200 meters.

While the two ASes scrambled to aim, Sousuke easily brandished his right hand, like throwing at something energetically. There was an outline like a falling axe with a sharp revolution. By the time he had comprehended that the solid object was a HEAT Hammer, Super Star's chest was already hit. He instantly exploded.

The explosive energy ripped through the armor of Super Star, driving extreme heat into the unit interior. That Savage was burning. It fell down and let go of its shot cannon.

"Damn!"

Diamond Head staggered in the explosive flame and fell to his knees. From his rifle he spat out 35 mm shells, filling the road with smoke in its shockwave and scattering his surroundings in a concentric circular.

"Now you did it!? You dirty dog! Biting back as a kid!? I'll kill you! I'll kill you!"

Cursing as much as possible, Diamond Head continued to shoot. But because of the distortion of the temperature, explosive smoke reduced his field of vision and he was not able to make good aim.

The shells cut the vacant air and a number of old buildings got torn up raggedly.

There was no response. He returned in order to confirm the position of the enemy unit. Already a few steps ahead, the Crossbow drew near. The chest armor scrubbed the asphalt to keep a low profile and it instantly lunged forward.

“What---?”

It was a tackle full of power.

The shock of the attack turned the world upside down.

The fuselage practically fell down. With the noise of the flickering screen, the indicators of the gyro were violently rotating. If you compared the armor and weight of the Savage to the Mistral, the Mistral was superior. But it had no stability to recover from such a collision.

“Dammit! Dammit, Dammit, Dammit!!”

The shock absorption system caused him to bite his tongue. He manipulated his limbs to cause the fuselage to move back into an upright position. The optical sensor had come back on and he perceived the scenery around him. His unit had landed horizontally and in front of his eyes the white Savage stood, with a shot cannon aiming his way.

The enemy had picked up the shot cannon which had been dropped by the crushed Super Star. Its muzzle was aimed at the cockpit, leaving an ominous brilliance.

The enemy Savage shot the shot cannon. The shell destroyed the mounted cannon in the nether region of his AS.

The enemy pilot asked a question, “Say it. How many more units?”

“So...”

The Crossbow let out another shot. It blew off “Diamond Head’s right arm.

“Stop it! E-e-eight units!”

“Have you seen a man with a black coat? Large build, short hair, Asian.”

“I...I’ve seen him. He was with the Chief in the arena-”

The enemy fired again. A fierce cannon roar pierced the night. His unit slid a few meters above the asphalt. Smoke came

out and the AS stopped. If he heard the necessary information, he had no reason to let him live. But the pilot of Diamond Head, who thought he had been killed, opened his shut eyes. Frightened tears flowed and his eyes blinked several times.

“Hi..uh?”

The enemy had already left the area. He was heading towards the center of the city.

In an instant, the strong urge to “chase and kill him” expanded in his heart, but immediately he realized that it was hopeless. Both the arms of his unit had been blown off. There was also no certainty that he could stand up.

“Are you fucking with me!? You think you have some compassion!? You can’t be saved now! Just look! The next time we meet I’ll definitely kill you! No, I’m going to fuck with you! You’ll be turning tiles in hell!”

His still functioning external speakers cursed with the man’s voice, echoing in the streets of a completely chilled Namsak.



Not even slightly worried about the curses that followed him, Sousuke hastened his unit to the center of the city.

It was good fortune that he was able to immediately use the mobile weapon taken from the enemy. First of all this was not the regular army. In a regular situation the mobile weapons of an AS, which are different from their human sized counterparts, would not be able to be picked up and used by an enemy. There is an encryption in the firing system to prevent it. To be able to break through the encryption and possess the weapon, even the best AI equipped in the M9 would require a suitable amount of time.

Furthermore-

What luck.

The shot cannon that his Savage was now carrying, was an Oto Melara made Boxer 57mm cannon. Back when he had still been piloting the Arbalest for Mithril that had been his favorite weapon.

There was a call in the open channel of the wireless radio.

“Do you hear me, Sagara?”

It was none other than the voice of Kurama.

“Would saying ‘loud and clear’ be enough?”

“I’m in the Arena. If you have the guts come and get me.”

“You’re not running away. You’ll regret that.”

“I wonder about that.”

And then the wireless radio cut out. Right now for them there was no need to engage in unnecessary conversation. One was being invited to be killed. And the other embarked to kill. There was no longer any room for bargaining or compromise.

That’s right, Kurama.

You do what you want. I will also.

From here on, it was not necessary to think. Instinct took over and he was shrouded in clear killing intent, clear hatred.

I will definitely kill that bastard.

There was a warning sound.

Sousuke immediately returned from his thoughts.

The fuselage temperature was not going down. The meter of the hydraulic system was uncertain. The drive system was making crisp strange noises. The Gyro, with merely 10 minutes of correction left, started to deviate in a strange manner.

But it would take a long time before the Crossbow caved in to the rising sound of repeated overuse.

There was no need to worry.

Then he encounters two new police car blockades. There were two patrol cars; the same as the previous one. They were not equipped with small fire power. Judging that fighting them would be useless, Sousuke fired a shot and broke through the blockade.

The buildings in the surrounding areas were not that tall. There were a number of street lights and a number of passersby. The Chief and the others, who knew that the vicinity would become a hostile area, had taken most of the residents into refuge.

In the center of the city, three ASes appeared in the shadows of the street lamps and neon lights.

Were they there from the start, or did they slowly catch up? Savage, Drache and Cyclone. Russian manufactured, German manufactured and English manufactured. There was such a variety of assembly that even Sousuke, who had grown up in disputed area of the Middle East, had not seen the like.

The enemy shot.

Sousuke's unit was surrounded by scattering shells. Glass and concrete splashed all around. They didn't even have decent aim. The weapons control system was mostly dead, and it was mostly roughed up. It would last five more minutes.

".....!"

He skillfully moved his unit to evade while taking manual aim. He pointed the Shot cannon at the Drache in the center.

He fired.

Miss. The Optic sensor and the aiming system's calculation were terrible. Correcting the ballistics, he let out another shot. The fuselage shook from the violent vibration of the 57 mm cannon. This time it was a hit. The enemy AS sparked and flew back, smashing into the porno shop behind it while white smoke scattered everywhere.

Wincing, the enemy fired.

Sousuke twisted his unit, hiding in a nearby building. Of course to also defend from the enemy bullets, this kind of cover was not enough. Before the 35mm shells the walls of the cheap structure were like a sugar pastry. No matter what it would be pulverized.

The penetrating enemy shells were scattering splinters and in the flurry of shots Sousuke's Savage had also taken a few hits.

Klunk, a strong impact hit.

It was still alright. The next bullet of enemy shells hit the building. His armor did not sustain serious damage. Having corrected his disordered gyro, Sousuke pushed his unit to run.

It would not be strange if the unit easily broke down from fatigue, but the Crossbow was not like that.

Why?

This was because of the unit's Software, the Operation System, Sousuke finally realized.

The shabby unit was able to deal with the violent scuffle because on top of the original program various modifications were put into it. If it were the same Savage that Sousuke used during the Afghan times, he would not be able to do it. In the old days it should have fallen and would have missed its aim. And then the enemy would not overlook the opportunity to strike.

Who improved this OS?

Who looked into the trouble of this unit?

Recalling that, something ignited in the calmness that Sousuke had preserved in his heart. No, it was not that the flame in his heart had been weak. It was that the passion further intensified. To the eyes of a beholder it would seem to be like lighting gushing out of him.

"Don't get in my way-" Sousuke muttered.

He spurred Crossbow on. He looked at all the indications on the screen, reading all the senses conveyed by the frame in an instant. Controlling the unit appropriately, he led it to the blind spot of the enemy unit.

Shooting from that position, how would the enemy move? Where would he move himself?

No matter how bad the sensor performance was, he already knew what was natural. Running past the ravine of the unseen building, Sousuke's Savage took the position that was his goal. The enemy unit, a Cyclone, was surrounded by a building.

He stopped, aimed, and weighed the timing.

The shot went beyond the building.

Penetrating the building materials, the 57mm cannon shells hit the side of the enemy's abdomen. The Cyclone caught fire and fell sideways.

That's 4 units.

The remaining Savage fired. This was also a random attack. From it, he revealed his own position. Sousuke calmly knelt his unit down and drove the armor piercing shells of his shot cannon into the remaining Savage.

5 units.

The loaded jet fuel caught fire, together with a fierce roar the enemy units exploded, shattering the glass windows of a nearby building.

Don't get in my way-

Chanting with dark eyes, his unit ran. Then 3 more units appeared. He took out two of them instantly.

Don't get in my way-

He was showered from the counterattack of the remaining unit. His broken chest armor had already been shot. The fragments of the pierced shell reached the cockpit and the left display screen

broke to pieces. The scattered plastic cut Sousuke's temple superficially.

Don't get in my way...!!

He paid no mind to the agony. He simply ascertained the unit's status. There was serious damage in the left half of the hydraulic system. Even then the Savage could still move. But it was already in its countdown stage until it stopped moving.

He aimed the shot cannon, and fired.

Hit. Crushed.

That's 8 units.

While busily operating the Crossbow's fuselage system, the hydraulics of the left foot was somehow restored. Not yet. The tattered machine could still move.

There were only two shots remaining in the shot cannon. With a single shot one enemy was taken down, Sousuke headed his unit toward the arena.

9 units.

He approached what appeared to be a floating Soccer stadium illuminated by the light of a mercury lamp. He eyed a police patrol car and an armored car in front; they were confused and were not prepared for an ambush attack. They didn't think that Sousuke would have appeared this quickly.

He saw the Chief in one of the patrol cars. Obviously in confusion, he ordered his surrounding men to "shoot". The infantry rifle would not be able to harm an AS, it was impossible-

Unexpectedly a scream was heard overhead.

"Oooh!!"

It was a roar from exterior speakers. The M6, equipped with a rifle with a monomolecular cutter as a bayonet, performed an ambush by jumping off from a building. He pressed against Sousuke.

A number of shots rained down. The Crossbow agilely- as “agilely” as a standard Savage could get- somersaulted and barely escaped the attack of the M6. The fragments of the shattered asphalt emitted white smoke, swirling in the surroundings of the unit.

The M6 started attacking with the bayonet at the same time that Sousuke got him in the sights of his shot cannon.

“.....!”

Sousuke pulled the trigger. There was an explosion like a flash near the Savage. The remaining shot of the shot cannon blew off the right shoulder of the M6 above, along with the weapon in its arm, which was now spinning in mid air. The bayonet rifle that the enemy had let go stuck vertically on the ground then fell on to the patrol car next to it. Its fierce vibration crushed the backseat.

“Shithead! You’re gonna have to pay for that!”

For the first time, he noticed the voice of his opponent. It was Dao. Vile curses spewed from his mouth. With the left arm, he pulled out a monomolecular cutter equipped in his unit’s hips, and pointed it towards Sousuke’s Savage. With intense enthusiasm he slashed forward. Sousuke deflected the slash with his cut shot cannon.

“Die, Sagara!! Die!!”

There was a warning sound.

The strength of the knees were collapsing. Crossbow’s hydraulic system had suddenly lost its power. The unit’s damage and fatigue had finally reached its limits.

At a time like this....!?

Sousuke gave up the agility of the hydraulic system, and moved with only the muscle packages of the unit. Looking upward, he stretched his hand out to the bayonet attached to the rifle that had fallen a moment ago.

What a sluggish movement. But this was the maximum. There was no further than this.

“It’s no use! Shitty bastard!”

Guessing its destination Dao’s M6 pierced the hand of the Savage before it had reached the gun. Then he thrust the monomolecular cutter in the cockpit at the chest area.

“....!!”

The right hand of the Savage searched for the gun, he had barely been able to use the left arm as a cover. Dao’s monomolecular cutter pierced through the left arm and sparks scattered like heavy rain. The arm’s armor, muscle package, and frame were being severed one by one, and then the chest armor began to corrode.

“Ha, hahaha! Go to hell!!”

Dao cried with a hysterical voice.

There was a fierce vibration and the noise of the casting armor being severed.

His own unit’s chest area was being cut down. It was just a little more until the cockpit. Just a few centimeters and Sousuke’s body would become two equal parts. And at that instant, the control system was down. The monitor was mostly broken, and the controls for the left side wouldn’t respond at all. It was all over.

If it were an ordinary AS, the unit would have already lost all control capabilities and all that would await the pilot would be death. This was true for the M9 and even for the Arbalest.

However.

In this case, the Crossbow’s right arm free manipulator still continued to move. He stubbornly continued to search the ground for the rifle.

This simple and tough system of the Savage had made it this far and had not died yet. The masterpiece that was this Arm

Slave should go down in history. It would not leave behind its pilot until the last moment.

“!”

The right hand found the rifle with a solid grip.

He raised the muzzle. There was no need to aim. He pushed the rifle to the body of the leaning M6. The 40mm shell vomited towards Dao.

The shot unit shook violently.

Silence.

A shroud hanging above the Savage looking upwards, the M6 was not moving and the monomolecular cutter that had been about to cut Sousuke had stopped. From the joints and places where it was shot leaked oil and blood were dripping. Of course white smoke and steam were hovering above the wreck.

Dao's jeers had also stopped.

That's 10 units.

“.....”

Sousuke let out a deep sigh and kicked off the rigorous M6. But the unit does not respond.

Sousuke's Savage had already completely lost its functions. The hydraulic system, of course, the electronics and the motor systems were already dead. The engine would also stop sometime soon. That unit would never move again.

The mission of the Crossbow had ended.

Sousuke silently pulled the lever of the emergency escape of the unit. The hatch at the head area blew off. Crawling out of the cockpit he took the carbine gun attached on the other side of the hatch and the spare magazine.

The policemen had already run away. There were no idiots who would linger to look at the scuffle of the ASes. He could only hear jeers and scream from afar.



Accidentally looking in the patrol car where he had fought with Dao, he found a familiar face on a corpse.

It was the Chief.

Taking refuge from the arena, he was caught up in his own battle. Bad luck for the guy. It was not even retribution. It was a useless death. But for Sousuke, the Chief was not his concern or his target.

Crossing the rubble scattered road, gripping the carbine gun in a stance without any openings, he headed to the entrance of the arena.

Kurama was inside there.

No matter what kind of ambush awaited, he had to go in.



He waited in the security office in the depths of the Arena. Even though Kurama had silently prepared for an ambush, Sousuke's "arrival" was unexpectedly early.

Even after releasing 10 units of AS to impede him, he was not stopped.

"Useless shitheads."

He took a 56mm shell packed in a magazine and slammed it into a German manufactured rifle.

There were 2 spare magazines.

He had even devised a trap. In one place inside the arena it would be possible to use a remote device to detonate a small amount of C4 explosives.

However, that would be enough.

If he would be able to entice the enemy into his skillful trap, all he had to do was to push the button. It was just a matter of whether Sagara Sousuke would pass through the trap, truly only god knew.

If we wanted to run away, he would still make it.

He was not really weak willed it was just, having a calm tactical sense, Kurama had carefully investigated if it was possible to withdraw or not. A reason to run away did not come into his mind. He did not make light of Sagara Sousuke's tactical skills, but they were not inferior to his own.

Kill.

When it was finally settled, he would leave that place. He would take a flight from the capital's international airport towards North America- that's right, in first class. He would be drinking champagne when the plane departed in celebration of having killed Sousuke very well.

Kurama grasped the rifle casually and left the security office without a sound.



Because the “Arena” was originally a Soccer stadium the central stadium was capable of being surrounded by a large gallery. The structure of the gallery was inserted with several stairs, toilets, shops, and small rooms.

He still didn't know where Kurama was. He also didn't have the time to know if he had laid some kind of trap or what its mechanism might be.

Inside his right boot it was damp and difficult to walk.

He was covered in his own blood.

The fragments that had flown around inside the AS had cut his right temple. That was where he was bleeding.

He pushed himself to walk and waves of agony burned through him. His field of vision was becoming gloomy and his head was getting dazed. Right now his own body was in a similar situation as the Crossbow.

The ceiling of the gallery was high; and light from the street lights and conflagration were streaming through the glass windows and diluting the bizarre oblong shadow.

Sousuke's own shadow was reflected on the walls of the gallery, dancing in an eerie shape. That shadow was like the grim

reaper. He held the carbine gun and flames flickered around him. His form was like a silent ghost.

He looked at the corner of his field of vision and then chased after the traces of the enemy with his eyes. Then, Sousuke finally noticed.

Ghost. Reaper.

Isn't that about him?

Up to this point, to get to this place, how many people had he killed?

What was his reason for his running like this? Was there any profit in their deaths?

He couldn't say that killing Kurama was the real reason. Wasn't the result of chasing after him to get him to spit out information about Amalgam?

For that reason he had built up a mountain of corpses. Among that mountain was also the corpse of Nami. The corpse of Nami who had seen the dreams of ordinary people.

Making himself go that far, to be able to temporarily meet that girl, what would he be able to say?

"I came here to rescue you. It doesn't matter how many people have already become victims; a cheerful girl like you can't die, you don't need to worry."

That can't be it. That kind of truth would only tear that girl apart.

She wouldn't be happy if people got killed for her sake. When they quarreled she would be noisy and would be fine with kicking and hitting him, but her true essence was to fight against war and death. Like a symbol of calmness and kindness. Since he was being driven by hatred to hurt, this kind of killing would be to harm the existence of the girl herself.

Karma.

Sousuke hardly understood the meaning of this phrase.

But he was being burdened with Karma.

No matter how he faced it, it was a tearing of his world beyond all repairs. Just like the second rule of Thermodynamics. He by no means- that's right, by no means- could attain happiness after reuniting with her. He couldn't go back to that school with the two of them.

From the start, wasn't that already it?

A simple truth, that's what he thought. It was not sorrow and despair, or the principle of pessimism, it was the grave truth. The rapids of the raging fates just gazed in coldness without feeling.

Even then, he could not stop.

He still had fighting spirit towards Kurama.

He also had a score to settle with Amalgam.

No, those impulses had already expired; the drive of his cells simply could not stop. Those were already the strength of the will and the fierce anger. Those elements had already reached another dimension.

In its foundation it was something automatic, always moving with him.

“Forward”

Moving irregularly dragging the crooked shadow of the reaper, he reached the semicircle of the arena's gallery.

There was no trap. There was not even the indication of any people. No-

He continued to approach the front of a large staircase; at the top of that floor was a presence.

The moment that Sousuke moved, the top of the floor flickered with the flame of a muzzle.

The sound of gunfire tore his ears. At the same time there echoed the sharp noise of shells piercing the air. Sousuke jumped to the corner of the gallery, heading in the opposite direction of the gunfire. With the agile warning of his eyes he stooped his body.

Considering the fact that he was absent minded from fatigue and injury, he regained the sharpness of his wits quickly.

The one shooting was Kurama. It was not that he had seen anybody, it was the floating silhouette in the darkness; he was able to judge from that.

He counterattacked. Pushing out the gun from the corner, he shot.

It couldn't possibly hit, the enemy was guarding his head. If he wanted to shoot he had to get out of the corner and try to move to gain a more advantageous shooting position. Kurama, at the same time, fired a diversionary shot, trying to retreat. Chasing immediately was dangerous.

Looking for another option, 15 meters to the left he found the entrance to a small floor used by the personnel. It was a multipurpose emergency staircase.

It shone brightly.

Even if the probability of getting shot was 50-50, the route was close enough.

Sousuke resolutely jumped to the first floor, running up at once. Blood stained his right boot making a sloppy and shameful sound.

When he got up to the second floor, Kurama was waiting in ambush. Inside the gallery of the second floor there was a shot from the shadow of a pillar with graffiti on it. As expected. He fixed the place in his mind and hid his body in cover, nimbly returning fire. Sparks were flying about nearby and shells were breaking into the concrete wall and floor with fluttering sounds.

There was not even any pretext of conversation. Originally, this was what a battle was.

As the bullets rained down, he waited for the timing of the enemy's magazine replacement to run to a more advantageous position. He barely made it on time. Kurama's delayed shots chased after him.

Shots flew from behind the big pillar.

Kurama was hiding, escaping inside and moving towards a blind spot.

Kurama retreated. Sousuke chased.

In between shots, the muzzle flashes projected a shadow on the walls of the gallery. The shadow was like a grotesque monster, moving brilliantly like it was projected into a frame.

Kurama ran away again.

The enemy faced the narrow passage- seeing him running towards the continuous stairs of the stadium's audience seat, Sousuke drew nearer with conviction.

It was tempting.

But running after him like that was dangerous. The audience seats were unobstructed. It became a situation where sniping from somewhere would not be strange. If he continued running after Kurama then they would be in another place, and he had to take a position where he could take Kurama out at once.

The broadcast seat-

If it were in the room where the announcer or commentator broadcasts the matches, it could work.

Sousuke made a prompt decision and headed towards the personnel passage. He ran towards the iron door where "unauthorized persons keep out" was written. He grasped the handle of the iron door and tried to turn it without a key. The door opened and he advanced towards the passage inside.

At that instant, Sousuke thought that his judgment was too relaxed.

His opponent was Kurama.

When Kurama had retreated he had meekly chased after him, as expected. It was different from the stairs some time ago. If it were to be finished, it had to be there. Then, since he was watching out for Kurama's trap, this was the place where he had aimed.

This door.

“.....!”

Using intuition, his back muscles became active, as if they had received an electric shock. He jumped back from the opened iron door. At the same time, the plastic explosives waiting in the door exploded. Sousuke was sent flying with the iron door.

There was a bluish white flash and a shockwave.

His left shoulder was weighed down by the iron door and with overwhelming force he was blown in the opposite direction.

The ceiling and floor changed places over and over.

His whole body slammed into the floor.

Even then, he rolled on the floor hitting several garbage cans. Sweeping them down, he finally stopped when he hit the opposite wall.

Explosive flame and white smoke spun in the gallery, slowly being seen. His body rolled from the garbage cans, pet bottles and empty cans scattered about. His eye caught them spinning in the air.

He was done for.

Even though he thought so, Sousuke immediately raised his body. With terrible shock and agony, he gathered his hands and feet. If he were wearing the Mithril made AS pilot suit that was shock proof and heat proof, this would not have been happening.

But his left arm would not move as he wanted.

Was it dislocated, or was it fractured? A burning pain was attacking him. It was like there was no strength. With both knees shaking, he stood up with the gun in his right hand supporting him.

“.....”

Raising his face, he headed forward, not knowing if he could still operate the gun. Both his eyes were misty. The reverberation of the explosion echoed in his head.

Heading towards the flame and smoke he saw the form of Kurama.

He was getting into the perfect shooting position, surely aiming for his body. He was finally confronting Sousuke. Stirring very little, he aimed his muzzle with all his might towards his opponent.

Kurama shot.

His body twitched with slow shock. The bullet hit, piercing. Even a bullet proof pilot suit could not stop a rifle bullet. Blood splattered the walls behind him.

Then there were several shots. He did not know if his staggering body was hit. He was unable to tell.

Is this it?

He felt total darkness behind his eyes and Sousuke collapsed.



He had not expected to kill him with the plastic explosives, but that he was able to stand there with gun after being hit was also unforeseen.

But, that was it.

Kurama, who had shot Sagara Sousuke, with rifle on hand and without getting careless, slowly approached.

He had to ascertain by making a headshot. Because of the flames from the explosion and smoke interrupting his field of vision, he could not grasp the extent of the damage from his position.

In most cases, the first shot was already a fatal wound. Even if he was left alone there was no doubt that he would die. He wasn't even conscious.

However, he felt a new presence.

It was not one person. Two, three, no four persons. Probably more.

There was a sound of faint rustling of uniforms and equipment. If he had been more attentive he would have noticed the presences despite their stealth.

It was them.

In the mountains near the vicinity of Munamera, he and the chief were attacked. Which Special Forces were they from? They had finally made it this far. As expected, he didn't want to face off with all of them; he needed to secure an escape route.

He didn't even waste a single moment of regret. Putting off Sousuke, Kurama agilely moved. First, he shot the man with the rifle in the shoulder that carelessly had half his body exposed in the stairs.

The sharp screams and gunfire echoed in the gallery.

Body cowering, he neglected the associate who helped his injured comrade. He silently moved to the opposite direction, running towards the south of the gallery.

He saw two enemy soldiers who tried to pincer attack him.

He aimed faster than the enemy and shot.

Pushing with simple strength would be enough.

One of them fell down defenselessly; another one shot his machine gun. Kurama's bullet proof coat was able to defend against a submachine gun's bullets. Without faltering, and with skill, he shot the enemy to death.

Faster than the man's back falling to the floor, Kurama rushed over to his place, taking a hand grenade out. He removed the safety pin and, beyond the passageway, threw the grenade in the direction where another enemy was hiding. *Clank*. Making noise in the air, the grenade rolled to the corner.

Curses and screams filled the air. There were continued explosions.

With a whirlpool of smoke as a backdrop in the dim light, Kurama, without mercy, shot the two people who fell in agony in the narrow passage.

“....hn”

His poker face did not change. The enemy was a hindrance to him again. Kurama couldn't stand it. While massacring these people vigorously, he felt like wasting them, no matter where they were from. But time was already up. He did not know how many enemies there were; remaining there would be too dangerous.

Fluttering his black and heavy bullet proof coat, he returned to the previous place with a fast pace. He was returning to the passage where the plastic explosives had detonated. Sagara Sousuke was not moving and on the verge of death. He had paced back to finish him off.

But Sousuke was not there.

He had disappeared in the smoke and only blood remained on the floor. His enemy was not there.

No, there were trails of blood.

There were bloodstains in a tottering pattern, going left and right, rolling into the walls of the gallery behind the garbage cans-

“Shi....”

From behind those garbage cans, a pale faced Sousuke, with carbine gun in hand immediately shot. Flanked with a heavy impact, Kurama's body staggered.

And then another shot. The rifle shells pierced the bullet proof coat, smashing his chest.

He could no longer stand. Kurama staggered to the opposite direction, kneeling on one knee and dropping the rifle in his hand. He collapsed into the blood trail made by Sousuke.



Hiding behind the enemy and not letting the opportunity run away was actually over thinking things. He was not dead yet. He could still move. He still had the strength remaining to pull the trigger.

That was it.

Sousuke stood up in agony and walked halfway, about 10 meters, to where Kurama had fallen.

His left arm was not responding. It was tremendous agony every time he breathed, and blood from his body continued to flow. There was a large hole in his stomach. But he was able to stand; his spinal cord was still connected somehow. But as for how much longer he would still be able to live, Sousuke could easily guess.

But, before that-

“Kurama” Sousuke said, mustering the remaining strength in his lungs.

With his right hand shaking he aimed the muzzle of his carbine gun towards his opponent. His aim was undependable and shaky.

“Tell me. Where is Chidori?”

“...listen... what do you plan to do?” Kurama murmured.

Blood was spluttering from his mouth.

“To save her.”

“Are you stupid?”

Even on the verge of death, Kurama’s voice echoed with amazement.

“Tell me.”

“Sorry. I’d as soon die gnashing my teeth.”

Well, that’s right. That was the natural response. But even then, Sousuke said.

“Tell me”

Kurama didn’t answer. In exchange, he said with a weak voice.

“I don’t know....both of us....simultaneously dying.... why not?”

“It’s her.”

“Is it the power of love? Don’t make me laugh.”

If he affirmed those words lightly, he would be falling to hell for thousands of years. Kurama’s voice was confined to an echo.

“Why can’t it be?” Sousuke asked.

There was no cynicism or objection, he was just purely inquiring.

Didn’t the current situation show it?

He had stood up on his own; then he had been victorious.

There was coincidence. But there was also some immeasurable element.

As for the results, he himself was standing there asking the questions. That was the truth of his authority.

Love or whatever, Kurama didn’t know those words.

But, in that situation, there was a singular reason. An unmovable will had intervened.

As a result, can he deny it?

“Say it.”

“San Carlos,” Kurama said with an indifferent voice.

“And then Nikelo, or Granada. It’s those places. After that, I don’t know.”

“Is that so?”

“Worthless. Whatever. It’s no good. Didn’t I stop smoking?”

After that, Kurama never spoke again.

Sousuke fell on both knees.

“San Carlos.”

Before he’d noticed, the carbine gun had fallen from his hands. His foot was bleeding. The big hole in his stomach was not closing. His field of vision was narrowing. Consciousness was disappearing somewhere far.

“Nickelo, Otherwise Granada....”

He recited like he was delirious.

He had to tell someone. But, who would take his place to fight? Who would get her back?

He did not know.

He didn’t know anything anymore.

What was he asking himself? What was he trying to say? Where would he disappear to now?

He fell down looking upwards.

The ceiling was already fading and mostly couldn’t be seen.

Michael Lemon was rushing over, looking down at him with a ghastly face.

What was he calling for?

Medics.

Syringe set.

Epinephrine.

Atropine.

He had heard those words many times. He knew those words very well in the past.

But those things didn't matter anymore.

What remained in his mind in the end was the form of that girl.

He was not thinking of Nami. Why was it that the girl was angry? She was scowling, with her fists on her hips, glaring at him.

But the next face came tearing at him. It was smiling and said, "Cheer up!"

While living in Namsak, he had not been able to think of her face. Now it was reviving with vividness. He thought that it might be good living like that. Right now he still could not believe it.

"Chidori."

He wanted to meet. No matter what. He already knew that it was impossible. He still wanted to meet her.

To be beside her.

Someone struck his back and said something.

Only that, that would be enough.

"Chidori."

Loneliness.

Coldness.

At least one more time-



There was a voice.

From far away.

From a place under the sky.



声が聞こえた。

どこか遠くから。

ずっと彼方の空の下から。

寄せては返し

砕け散っていく波の音。

ぼんやりとした情報の断片が

さまざまな色や音となって漂っていく。

A voice was heard. From somewhere far away. Far away from the bottom of the sky. It returned the shattered sound of the breaking waves. Vague pieces of information were drifting, become a variety of colors and sounds.

To start with she was in a shallow form of sleep. The girl's attention was being pulled away. It was returning to the sound of waves breaking.

In that direction was a dim echo, a dim voice.

Her surroundings were absentmindedness and light blending together. From there floated a faint fragment of information; floating with different reasons and sounds unchanging.

She spun around from the fragment. That voice was faintly disappearing. The girl made an effort to pick it up.

It was the usual. It was pulling from inside of her.

The girl knew that voice.

Wanting to meet with him.

That was what the voice was conveying.

At first, the girl did not know the meaning of that voice.

But immediately she understood.

To leave that place with "him"; in other words it was about "him".

The girl indistinctly conjectured whose voice it was. It was her own, but at the same time, it was not. She had never met the owner of that voice. She would never be able to meet them from then on.

At the same time, in a different space-time- *this is different, what world is this?*- She saw the man she wanted to be with. Meeting him once... there was a person with that fate.

Fate.

How they were speaking across that strange territory the two people did not know.

And then the voice sounded again.

However, separating with him-

The voice, strictly speaking, did not abide by the language of man that is “Tense”. But at the same time it was “Farewell”, there was also a “I will be leaving you”.

Farewell? Why? The girl asked.

----Because I am dead.

So that was it, “being dead”.

----How unfortunate.

----How sad.

----No one could have replaced you.

Is he alright? Where is he?

----I do not know.

----Namsak

----with a deep wound.

Not only that, the girl knew more than that. He was continuing to fight, he was alone, and he, probably, was searching for himself.

Her chest ached.

She wanted to stop.

But she didn’t want to stop.

What should she do? The girl did not know.

He was able to meet you. So that guy is special?

----I don’t think so.

----You know right?

----He is only a normal human.

Even then, wanting to see me, also meeting you. And that girl. And that guy.

----That is not a strange thing.

----It is strange to have met you.

That might not be so.

It’s useless to say sorry right?

Yeah. But I’m sorry

----But that's alright.

----If it's a different place

----there would also be a different result.

----I have to go.

----There's also that whisper.

I understand.

----Goodbye

----But one last thing.

What?

----If you meet with him one more time, please forgive him.

----Be sure to hug him.

I can't promise that...

----I know.

----But I think that would be best.

----Even thinking about it is good.

And then the voice became farther. And then it could no longer be heard

.....



“n.....”

Waking up, the soft light struck at her eyelids.

It was dazzling.

Chidori Kaname closed her eyes and turned over with a white sheet.

She could hear the sounds of the waves.

The sea air was a gentle wind. Stirring from the fully opened window, the lace of the canopy hanging in the king size bed floated gently.

When did she fall asleep?

What did she dream? She couldn't remember the details. As usual. Although it was an important story, everything had disappeared.

What kind of dream did she see? It was like the remains of a nostalgic sadness and loneliness. Kaname's mood became melancholic.

It was not noon yet.

Where is this mansion? Where is this seaside, on top of a hill? Outside the window, the glittering green seas were spread all over.

With an unpleasant chill she pulled the sheets closer to herself. Right now she wore only a thin camisole and shorts.

There was a knock on the plain but refined door.

"Come in...."

"Please excuse me."

A girl in a suit came in. Her age and physique were not so different from Kaname's.

She had brown hair cut in short bob and she was wearing boorish eyeglasses.

Kaname sat up in the bed and tilted her head lightly at the girl.

"Were you resting?"

"It's alright. What do you need?"

"Three o'clock tea. From then on, the evaluation of the data from the Behemoth-I that was delivered this morning, we wish to question you about it."

"On the desk. The USB."

"Thank you very much."

The girl poured Darjeeling in the tea cup and produced a small dish of cookies.

"Are you tired?"

“Not really. I only dosed off.”

“You had a sad dream right?”

“How did you know?”

The girl looked at Kaname touched the corner of her eye lightly with her index finger.

“Tracks of your tears.”



After she said it Kaname looked at the mirror inside the bedroom. It was as the girl had said.

“That’s right,” she muttered, wiping the corner of her eyes.

“Sad dream. Probably not only about me, everyone must have seen it.”

Why would she not accept being beside him? What was the basis for those feeling? Tears began flowing from her eyes again.

She sipped the tea.

It had a wonderful aroma and flavor. Even then, her tears did not stop.

Epilogue

In the midst of the street lights, light snow was fluttering slowly about.

It was late at night. The port city was completely asleep. The moored boats and merchant ships were laden with thick snow on top.

In the corner of the harbor, there was an old worn out warehouse. The exterior was brickwork, with tatters here and there, without even any hint of repairs being made. There was also a giant, five meter tall, rusted iron door.

A woman who was known to be called “Wraith” stopped in front of that warehouse. She was driving a second-hand two ton truck that had dented panels.

Leaving the engine on, she got out of the vehicle. She was heading towards the gate opening of the warehouse.

In front of the gate, a man wearing a coat waited for her. He was short and stout. At a glance from afar, one might mistake him for barrel.

“Right on time. Really conscientious,” the man said.

Without replying, the woman carefully surveyed the surroundings of the warehouse. There were no observing eyes. Before she had gotten to this place via the vehicle, elaborate inspections had been made.

“Where’s the shadow?”

“If there is one it won’t be here”

“That’s right. Inside the car.”

The man retreated from the warehouses gate, pushing the switch for the front iron gate. The engine roared and the door

opened. Because of the rust in the rails, the rubbing shrieks of the metal resounded to the nearby neighborhood. The woman returned to the driver's seat and got the vehicle inside the warehouse.

This time she shuts the engine off and got out of the vehicle.

The iron doors closed behind her. The light shining from the street lamps outside quickly became thin. At the same time, the thundering noise of the door could be heard and the interior of the warehouse became pitch black.

She took out a red emergency lamp. Aside from the short statured man there seemed to be others there. There were three men with assault rifles. It must have been the minimum required.

"Get the cargo," the man said.

The woman opened the rear of her two ton truck. In the cargo hold of the vehicle was a large wooden crate, like a large refrigerator.

"Is this it?"

"That's right."

"Good job recovering it."

"Because the police were also in confusion it was troublesome getting this out of Japan."

"Hm"

The man did not verify the contents. This was because the woman had already said "that's right" and would have already made certain of it. There was no reason to doubt her.

"Mister Hunter. Before I entrust this to you, there is something I need to confirm" the woman said.

"Please do so."

"Was this the general's?"

"I don't think I know. If I knew, you and I would already be dead."

“What about you. I can’t understand your reasoning in going this far.”

“That’s mutual. I was also abandoned.”

The man smiled after saying it.

“If it was a puzzle being assembled in front of you, you would want to see it completed. That’s what I think of as human nature.”

“And that’s your only motive?”

“Well there is one other; it would be good to retaliate. And about that girl, how do I say it, you’re also interested, right?”

“.....”

“Well, in any case, can you let me have a little look? Of course it’s still incomplete.”

The woman nodded in consent, so he walked to the rear of the giant trailer. He opened the container door. Inside was a large mass, a kind of machinery that crouched and was covered with a black sheet.

“Oops....”

Hunter slowly unfastened the tarpaulin sheet.

What the woman saw was the head of an Arm Slave- the top of its head. Inside the container, an AS was completely stowed inside. It was lying in a sprawled posture.

She was barely able to distinguish it. This unit was the so called “Third Generation”.

But it was not an M9.

It was something she had never seen before.

She did not know the whole story. She also didn’t know the unit’s functions. But could it be just her imagination? The coldness in the atmosphere was freezing, but it couldn’t be felt in the surroundings of this unit. From inside the container, there was some form of strange “heat” leaking out.



This unit was burning in rage. Boiling in its fighting spirit.
It had made an oath of revenge and hungered for the blood
of its enemies.

Why did she feel that way?

“What’s this guy’s name?”

“Doesn’t seem to have one. Because this is a project that doesn’t exist. It’s just, well, if we were to continue in its series-”

Hunter narrowed his eyes, looking up at the unit.

“It’s [ARX-8]”

The End



Chapter 01

東南アジア編となった『ワン・マン・フォース』。宗介の孤独な戦いと、彼の決意をうかがわせる扉イラスト

『燃えるワン・マン・フォース』スペシャル企画

四季童子イラスト・コレクションⅢ



Part 02

A illustration of a Savage sitting before ancient ruins. Sousuke participates in the match as the pilot for Namis team - "Crossbow".



Part 3

Nami has feelings for Sousuke. But even though Sousuke feels at ease living here, he can't dispel the feeling of impatience that he's been fighting in his chest.



Part 4

A man called Chief captures Sousuke and Lemon. A deal is made, and Sousuke will participate in a Organization's dangerous Yami competition... ♪



第5話

開闢技会に出場した直前の前
に、＜ミスリル＞の最新鋭機
M9が現れた。イーストには
M9の禍々しい姿が！



第6話

M9に対し、宗介は旧型のサ
ページで立ち向かう。宗介、
ガミ、レモン、それぞれの運
命が動き始めた!!



第7話

そして衝撃的な未来へ！大切なもの、その全てを守ることはできないのか？ 宗介の背負うものは重い



第8話

怒りと闘志をたぎらせ、宗介は戦場へ向かう。傷つきボロボロになりながらも、尚、威圧的なサベージ

第9話

なぜそんなにしでまで、彼らは戦うのか？ なぜ立ち上がるのか？ 宗介とクラマ、宿命の対決が幕を上げる！



賀東招二
SHOUJI GATOU

フルメタル・8 パニック!

燃えるワン・マン・フォース



ファンタジア文庫

Editor's Afterword:

Oh, haven't done one of these yet...

Since I couldn't find a good place to stick it in before the book, I thought I'd include back here a few more links that were originally part of the release. These are for the livejournal and deviantart accounts of the original people working on this project. I'm not sure if they're still active (I know Shutazen's livejournal is not anymore) but here you go:

Visit Shandy at:

<http://ravyn-09.livejournal.com>

<http://ravyn-09.deviantart.com>

Visit Jeannie at:

<http://phoenixdown7.livejournal.com>

Also, sorry there aren't captions for the ending pictures. Most of them were never translated and there's no way I can make out all the kanji, so I didn't even bother. At least I "translated" the colored pictures. My Japanese is not that good to begin with so I did my best with them. The second one (with the M6 and the HEAT Hammer) was literally right next to exactly what it said in the text so I didn't bother writing it twice.

Well, see you all in the next volume.

~Moonfaerie24